

THE BODY'S RAPTURE

Jules Romain

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RAPTURE

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I
LUCIENNE'S STORY

I

I CAN still see Marie Lemiez and myself seated opposite each other in the hotel dining-room. A table was always reserved for us near a kind of hot buffet, where plates were put to keep warm. The other diners were all men, and sat at two larger tables near the windows.

Marie Lemiez said :

"As soon as they began to talk about piano lessons I mentioned your name. I sang your praises, as you may imagine. They will expect you this evening, about half-past five, if you are free. I told them, naturally, that you were very busy, and that you would have a good deal of trouble to get away at that hour. I said also that I was not sure you would be able to let them have all the lessons they wanted. That was the best way to make them decide."

"How many do they want then ?"

"Four a week. You can take the two sisters together or one after the other, just as you like. You see, in spite of their age, they scarcely know their scales and the idea is to make up for lost time. But they're sterling folk. They'll still be with you in a couple of years even, if you care about it."

"I'm glad you're going to get to know them. I've told you a good deal about them already, but, personally, I've no talent for reproducing my impressions. And besides, it's not easy to get a clear notion of them or of the way they live either."

The news was very welcome to me. For two months I had been in severe financial straits; or at any rate that was the way I looked at it. Others might not, perhaps, have taken matters so seriously, since, far from running into debt, I had succeeded in keeping by me a sum of three hundred francs. But I was compelled to take strict account of my expenses. If I had to lay out even a franc that was at all unexpected, it involved me in quite lengthy calculations.

Still, I don't think I am mean. Certainly I am not if meanness consists in being fond of money. I can say without affectation that I fear and despise it. I could adapt myself quite well to a life of complete deprivation. Two things which attract me about what I imagine to be a nun's existence are its poverty and peace. But a girl who gives piano lessons in a small town cannot allow herself to sink to the depths of poverty and openly remain there. She has to struggle ; and that is as dismal as to carry about in one's body chronic premonitory symptoms of disease.

Marie Lemiez added :

" They wanted to know your terms. I replied that I had no idea what they were but had no doubt it would be easy to come to an understanding with you, and that the important thing for them was to engage you."

" That puts me in rather an embarrassing position."

" Not at all. They're quite comfortably off, though their way of living is no better than that of people with quite a small settled income. And besides, they live some distance away. Don't go and agree to a ridiculously small sum. I personally charge ten francs an hour for my science lessons. If you take less I can tell you they'll be disappointed rather than otherwise."

" Yes, but you have a degree and teach in the High School."

" A degree ? Do you suppose they know what that is ? Oh, by the way, they asked me whether you had been to the Conservatoire. That was inevitable after the way I'd been praising you. But I told them the truth : briefly, that you were one of D——'s best pupils, adding, however, that your family, making rather an excessive sacrifice to middle-class prejudice, had not considered it suitable for you to pursue the ordinary course of study at the Conservatoire. You'll hardly believe what an excellent effect those few words had. The mother turned round to each of her two daughters, one after the other, then to her husband, then to me ; then she nodded her head once or twice, benevolently, like a judge. Of course, what she meant was : ' Goodness ! there really is a certain amount of narrow mindedness in that attitude. Now we, personally, see nothing improper in our daughters learning Latin, physics, and anatomy. Nevertheless, the young person

we are discussing has evidently received a good education, and the prejudices which have held her back at the very outset of her career really do her honour.' You see, therefore, my dear Lucienne, that you are going to make your appearance over there preceded by a reputation for saintliness."

We rose. Marie Lemiez left me almost directly, in order to prepare the apparatus for her physics course. I found myself alone at the corner of the triangular market-place in the centre of the old town.

I felt as though I were slightly intoxicated. The advent of this new help had surprised me in the midst of my poverty, and for that very reason half dazed me. I took pleasure in not making an immediate examination of my windfall, in not entering into any calculations or working out how it would affect my daily existence. Or it may be that deep down in me some humbler attendant of my understanding, a kind of devoted servant, undertook the trouble of making a hasty summary of all these computations; but, as yet, I was conscious of no more than a vague bustle, a cheerful and reassuring murmur.

I walked two or three times round the market-place. It appeared to me that the objects I perceived had become much more interesting, or, rather, that I was at last about to be able to take an interest in them and do them justice. I had not yet begun to consider them, but I was getting ready to do so. I had the foretaste of a pleasure that I felt I should soon owe to them.

It was while I was completing perhaps my second turn round the market-place, that I became aware that this inward ferment was being succeeded by a definite upwelling of affection for the outside world. My faint feeling of intoxication, instead of being merely an agreeable internal giddiness, was being transformed into an ability to look things straight in the face and not skim over what enveloped them—that sort of neutral glaze with which they are overlaid—but to penetrate into their living reality.

There was a statue in the middle of the market-place, and the Town Hall on one side, and a mass of shops on each of the other two. To-day, when I desire to recall that moment, I see first of all, a bright green water-pot, looking extremely jovial

and sturdy, set on a shelf about a man's height from the ground ; and not even the whole pot, but simply its paunch, shining and convex, like a sun rising through mist. Next I see come into view a display of earthenware, all apparently offspring of the first pot : then a woman seated beside these goods, but not indolently, or as though she had got there by accident, quite the contrary ; she is solidly installed, constituting one substance with her shop, and making the arrangement of all the articles orderly and natural by her mere presence ; somewhat in the same way as the odd appearance of masses of leaves hanging in the air is explained when the trunk and branches of the tree are discovered.

After that I see again a cookshop, a fruitshop, and a drapery store. Everything seemed clean and new. The most trifling object—a basket, a cabbage, a piece of cloth—had a certain air, came towards me with a physiognomy that was resolute and, as it were, impatient to be seen. To tell the truth, my prevailing impression was not that a fresh lustre had been given to the surfaces of things so as to renew their aspect, for that is a sufficiently fleeting pleasure which I had often experienced before, one which gives the mind superficial entertainment without moving it profoundly, but I believed I was entertaining a deeper sentiment, less illusory and akin to actual delight.

Accordingly I looked about me with pleasure and confidence. I was desirous of profiting by my mood. Too often, I told myself, there has been a veil between external things and myself, which set them at a distance from me, and falsified them to such a point, that at times I was ready to doubt the stability and wearing quality of a bar of iron even, but to-day I feel them positively before me, positively real, solidly themselves, and yet friendly to me. I rejoice in the look of fullness they have. I should like to think that they are filled to overflowing and that their surface shines, not because the light caresses them or because happy eyes look on them, but because they are distended by the rich abundant flesh beneath.

I reproached myself. For as I was well aware that the world had not changed since the day before, I was angry with myself for having waited until this moment to find so much stimulus in what surrounded me. Three people were standing in the

draper's shop. I cannot better express the pleasure I experienced in observing them, than by saying that I actually assimilated, as though it were some imperative and agreeable necessity, the need they had, at that particular moment, to live, to breathe, to make gestures, to be in that shop and not elsewhere, to touch precisely the material they were touching, to speak words which I did not hear, but whose utterance I imagined I could feel in my own breast.

It needed this forcible impression to draw my attention to the fact that I had already a thousand times, without noticing it, been affected by the contrary sentiment, that of refusing to accept the actual presence, attitudes and movements of the persons whom I saw in any particular place, so that I used to make a certain inward effort to correct their poses or restrain their gestures, and, in short, would enter into a mental struggle against them, which would cause me, finally, an obscure weariness ; or, again, I would have the more neutral but equally fatiguing sentiment of lacking the most elementary sympathy with them, and of being entirely detached from all their agitation, and of being outside their orbit just as they were outside my own.

Not for a moment did it occur to me to smile at my excitement which, I might have reflected, had so commonplace an origin. It is only now that I think of it. I might have told myself that it was pretty humiliating to experience so many deep feelings ten minutes after learning one was going to earn a few extra sous. But does such susceptibility really indicate a lack of natural refinement ? I have never had much of that kind of modesty. Had I been born a man, and in the manner of young fellows, wished to make merry with boon companions, I should have welcomed, without shame, the exaltation which may be generated by wine or clamour. It is probably because she had divined something of this side of my character that Marie Lemiez sometimes said I had no morals, although she could see that I was living, on the whole, a life that was austere, and although I consider that I have a far deeper understanding of saintliness than she has. It seems to me that what is important is for one's spirit to be capable of giving sudden proof of a strength or an elevation of which one did not

suspect it. Why question the particular manner in which it chose to manifest itself? And if, in order to be able to admit that a sentiment is noble [one desires at all costs to be certain that its origin is noble], am I sure that the enthusiasm I felt that day had not its real cause and, if I may say so, its origin, in the future? I know that we are not accustomed to think in this way and that to try to express an idea of that kind is to border upon absurdity. But the experience I have since acquired has convinced me that the mere fact that it is difficult to give reasonable expression to a thought, is not sufficient proof that it is less sound than another.

I had not consciously intended to take those three turns round the market-place. It was in a similar absence of mind that I entered the rue Saint-Blaise, and as I did so the agitation of my spirit changed its aspect yet again. I returned once more to thinking of my own person, my own interests, the material possibilities of rearranging my life. I had a childlike delight in making my calculations, which I complacently went on repeating; for the figures which passed my lips, as I murmured them almost aloud, left behind a savour of security which seemed inexhaustible.

It was four months now since I had begun to live in this town, less celebrated on its own account than by reason of the neighbourhood of F——les-Eaux. My mother, widowed three years earlier, had just married again without much considering me. Thereupon I began to consider how to make myself independent; and although my best opportunities were in Paris, my master D—— could easily have helped me to profitable lessons, my sole ambition was to leave that city, so as to simplify my relations with my mother, and perhaps, also, to enjoy the luxury of my grievance. My friend Marie Lemiez who had been at school with me in Paris, had a post as science mistress in the country. We corresponded from time to time. I asked her whether there was room for a piano teacher in the small town she worked in. I do not think she made very searching inquiries. Chiefly she consulted her feelings of friendship for me, and she replied saying I should certainly be able to get lessons, and that she would herself introduce me to several families and that she would hail my advent as a blessing

from heaven itself. I imagine she was suffering from acute boredom.

Actually, the commencement of the experiment proved very painful to me. For the first month I had but two lessons a week, each lasting an hour, for which I was paid at the rate of five francs each. Consequently, all I made was forty-five francs a month. On my arrival, not anticipating such a state of affairs, I had arranged to take my meals *en pension* in the same hotel as Marie Lemiez, and had hired a suitable room close by, as well as a piano. My own had remained at my mother's. I did not want to have it sent until I knew whether I should be staying for any length of time. My total expenditure was nearly a hundred and fifty francs a month, including service. Thus my situation had turned out disastrously. The provision of five hundred francs with which I left Paris looked like being exhausted within three months.

From the beginning of the second month I withdrew into my shell, as a defensive measure. For I was determined to extricate myself unaided. I had three hundred and seventy francs left. I put three hundred aside as a last resource against positive destitution or sickness, and this sum I deposited in a bank, so as not to be tempted to break into it. I found a cheaper room. I gave up having my meals at the hotel. I kept only the piano.

Of my four months of penury the second is the one I remember most kindly. The very excess of my poverty and the suddenness of the change had flung me into a sort of sombre ecstasy. Renunciation, as it approaches completion, fills the soul with a tension which has much that is inspiring in it. In me, as perhaps in many, there is an ascetic in abeyance, only wanting to be proved. On the other hand, moderate hardships, and the perpetual struggle to balance a budget no more than slender, fill me with weariness and depression.

From morning till night I was in the grip of a kind of hardly defined fever, and when I was walking, for I went out often, it created in my immediate neighbourhood, in my ears, in my head, something comforting and deep which ended by becoming a sort of music around me. Every day I walked under the ramparts of the town and round by the apse

of an old church. I have only to think of it to feel again that shuddering sensation. The interior of the church did not attract me. It seemed to me that some religious ceremony moved with me, the lights and echoes of which, reaching the walls, gave them, so to speak, an air of profound sadness, as though the outer wall of stones, at least, had been affected and modified by the trepidation of my spirit.

At nightfall I would feel my fever gradually gather itself together, choose its resting-place, and become a tingling in my eyes and throat. I returned to my room. I made a clear space on the mantelpiece. With an attention that was at once meticulous and listless, I trimmed the spirit-stove and prepared my meal in one of my two utensils. Sometimes it was an egg in a small enamel dish, sometimes potato soup in a doll's casserole.

In order to eat, I laid a place on the small table, halfway between the fireplace and the bed. The tingling of my throat and eyes increased, and I shed two or three tears, whose taste mingled with that of my first mouthful.

There was no attempt to be sorry for myself ; but neither did I make any effort to combat the tears which filled me like a suppuration all the long day.

Marie Lemiez was quite aware of the restrictions I had imposed upon my material existence ; but she was by nature incapable of picturing in detail the situation of another. She often came to see me, talking of her own affairs, questioning me, cursorily enough, about mine, relating some school anecdote or begging me to play her something on the piano. One evening she arrived just as I was finishing the fried egg which completed my meal, and which had also been its commencement. Was it the manner of my lodging or some other circumstance ? Marie Lemiez burst out laughing. She must have noticed, then, that I had been crying, for she showed some embarrassment and, for the rest of the evening, was more affectionate than usual.

Probably she continued, when she returned home, the reflections which had been inspired in her by the sight of my distress, for two days later she had found me another course of lessons. A little later one of my pupils caused the family of

one of her friends to request my services. In a word, during the third month I could count on eight hours a week. It was still very little. The families which employed me paid only what I was strictly entitled to, and only too frequently it happened that a celebration of some kind, or the indisposition of a pupil—as for me I took good care not to be ill—obliged me to remain idle. Altogether, my monthly receipts did not amount to a hundred and fifty francs.

I thought myself justified in going back to the hotel for my midday meal. It seemed to me rather a rash indulgence ; but Marie Lemiez most pressingly urged me to do so. My situation, as seen from her standpoint, now appeared very satisfactory, and had I refused I am sure she would have suspected me of miserliness.

For my own part I needed a distraction from my solitary musings. I had been long in retirement. At first my heart had been full of a tremulous inner peace, a serenity pregnant with secret tears. The recollection of it is still dear to me. But little by little, in proportion, perhaps, as my wretchedness lost its capacity for intoxication, this complex pleasure was undermined and anxiety was a more present factor than tranquillity. In the end what most particularly afflicted me is what I might call the excessive obtrusiveness of my thoughts. They went on and on at too close a distance to me ; their tyrannical presence was not sufficiently remote. I was no longer protected by the kind of barrier that is usually established between our thoughts and ourselves by a series of mild distractions. And then, they succeeded each other too rapidly. They jostled each other. No single one of them lasted long enough. It was as though time itself was in a fever.

The animation of the hotel restored my mind to a soberer gait. It also improved the quality of our conversation. When Marie Lemiez and I met either in my room or hers, we would suddenly realize we were both fighting a strategic battle with silence. There was something invincibly solitary even in our actual sentences. I mean that they were scarcely more than thoughts spoken aloud before some chance witness. In the restaurant that was no longer the case. Our talks, as if brought back to a natural environment and revitalized by the

proximity of our similars, very soon resumed their normal courses. They went on their way unaided, and somehow independently of us.

I still had more time than I needed for my reflections. I was no longer wretched enough even to have the right to let everything go. Now I had to anticipate and prepare a long way ahead for the business of buying a jumper or a pair of shoes. Or suddenly I would be seized by the dread of losing a pupil. A mother's question about her daughter's progress, if it seemed to require a definite answer, was enough to disquiet me.

Shall I confess, too, that I had feelings of envy, or at any rate of a bitterness very like it? When I was in greatest distress I had regarded the good things of this world with genuine detachment; or rather I had ceased to see them. But as soon as I was in control of a monthly budget of a hundred and forty-five francs, I rediscovered the fact that certain things were desirable and that certain people possessed them. I no longer had the courage to pass a more than usually resplendent shop-window without a glance. I would stop weakly in front of a clothes-shop or a milliner's. I could not help observing how other women went in, nor could I help following them, in spirit, into the midst of the finery and perfumes that I was far from incapable of caring about; nor help telling myself that the only claim they had, better than my own, to the enjoyment of these things, was no doubt the fact that they desired them more basely.

In the evenings, especially, I found myself no longer protected against the sinister charm that a well-lit shop-front diffuses into a street. I would halt a yard from the great windows, and I must have had, without suspecting it, the wide eyes of a slum child. Expensive articles spread out under rows of lamps, make a spectacle which of itself astonishes us; one which, in addition, is instinct with criticisms of life. Is it possible to resist a power so similar to that exercised by churches? But in this case the lighting, all golden as it is, is as though tinged with bile. The rays that strike into the heart leave envenomed traces.

In getting me those four lessons a week and getting them at a figure to which I had hitherto been unaccustomed, Marie

Lemiez had not helped me to a fortune ; still it meant that my poverty had come to an abrupt end. I was escaping the need of sordid calculations and could give myself up to meditations more congenial to my nature.

My walk had, as it happened, conducted me towards the well-stocked windows of two or three of the most central and best-equipped shops of the town, those which tolerably well reproduced the luxury of Paris. For although the town was of moderate size only, the proximity of the little watering-place inspired it with a certain distinction. Some of the stores did not look at all bad.

I did not now avoid them. I found that I could examine their wares with a new sense of tranquillity. The thought that henceforward I should have money enough to buy myself a piece of material, or a yard of ribbon to freshen up a hat when I wanted it, did away with any desire for more imposing articles too costly for my means. I looked at them without relating them to myself, with the sort of look I should have given to the inspection of the finery of another age in the glass cases of a museum. I realized then that I did not belong to the race of the insatiable ; or that, at any rate, the things that could profoundly trouble me were not to be found in shop-windows.

II

AT twenty minutes past five I was outside the railway station. I realized that I had forgotten to ask Marie Lemiez how to get to the Barbelenets. All I knew for certain was that it was somewhere in the vicinity of the depot where M. Barbelenet was employed. He was the head, or else his deputy, of the workshops, which were said to be very important and employed a numerous staff. But the buildings attached to the station extended to a considerable distance, forming a town almost as large as the other. I had never had occasion to explore it. The place I knew best was the platform for Paris, and on that I had actually set my foot but once.

It was getting dark. Even if some kind soul would consent to direct me I should have little chance of finding my way through the maze of sheds. At best I should lose a lot of time. I should reach the house out of breath, flustered, and late for my appointment.

I went into the station and eyed the bookstall. The girl in charge was a lackadaisical young woman who seemed created for a life of boredom which would never cause her the least inconvenience. I asked her if she knew M. Barbelenet and how to get to his house. But I repented immediately of having put the question. Before even opening her mouth to reply she moved her head in so animal a fashion, and dropped her eyes to her newspapers so vacantly, that I felt sure that in her kindness she was going to say something quite ridiculous. "M. Barbelenet? Yes. The manager of the workshops, you say? Yes. Well, you need only go out of the station and turn to the right, then take the second on the right again. It's over there."

She had obviously simply guessed at the probable situation of M. Barbelenet's house, whom she was no doubt now hearing of for the first time in her life. I had a good mind to ignore

her reply. But I could not be so ungrateful for the woman's kindness. Besides, I could see she was obstinate. If it looked as though I were not going to take her advice, she would call me back and repeat her directions in greater detail, perhaps even leave her stall and come with me herself.

I accordingly left the station. It was twenty-five minutes past five. I was wasting time in a ridiculous manner and possibly seriously injuring my position. People who do not know us judge us from the most trifling appearances. They would think I was lacking in punctuality and who knows, possibly dismiss me politely.

I was hoping to see some employee in the station yard. But there was no sign of one. I took a sudden decision and re-entered the station with an air of determination, going straight across the hall to a small door which gave on to the platform, trembling lest a voice should come after me from the bookstall.

There I found one of the men employed on the line, who was standing on the other side of the door with a lantern in his hand. I put my question to him.

"Ah! Then maybe you're the young lady who is coming to see M. and Mme Barbelenet this evening?"

"Yes, I am."

"I was just waiting to take you. You would never have found the place alone."

I did not draw his attention to the fact that it was only a lucky chance had led me to him. I was too pleased to be anything but indulgent. The precaution taken by the Barbelenets in sending this workman to meet me seemed auspicious. "I am going to walk in front of you, miss. There's no danger so long as you keep close to me. Stop every time I tell you. Trains number 117 and 83 have been signalled; 117 has three headlights, one big and two little, in a triangle; 83 has only two, one big and one little. It's a local. But 117 comes in very fast. We shall have to be careful. There are still some goods trucks shunting about on sidings 11, 12 and 13. They're not so dangerous, of course, but they're just as capable of running you down."

As he talked, we walked up the platform. A blue indicator bore the word Paris, lit up by a dreary light. There was a

sense of wind outside ; not that it was possible to feel an actual current of air blowing against one's body or stirring one's hair, but there was a subtle discomfort of one's whole person. I could scarcely see the passengers, standing here and there with their luggage beside them. I knew nothing of their reasons for leaving the town, or why they were travelling. I had not said the good-byes they had said. But I experienced the poignancy and the essential quality of their vigil. "The train is coming," I thought, as they were thinking. "I too am watching for its headlight out yonder, there in the night ; a night which, instead of being heavy and friendly, as it generally is, because of the imminent future, has become something fatal and tremulous. The moment that foreign light penetrates into the station, instantaneously the soul is besieged by a host of questions. And all the bustle of arrival will be needed to spare it the pain of answering. Oh, the wretchedness of changing from one place to another ! What is better in the whole world than the accustomed kitchen lit up by the leaping fire !"

We passed the last passenger. The glass roof no longer sheltered us. The light, too, was now behind us ; it seemed to me, suddenly, that it had been quite bright and comforting. The wind was no longer what it had been. The steady draught through the station was here split up into irregular blasts.

The platform came to an end. What I had been accustomed to call a station went no further. I had left a place that had been almost hospitable, a sort of sanctuary, where material forces take on an appearance of humanity and allow us to move among them without too menacing an aspect.

The region that now stretched in front of me was not adapted to my usual method of progress. Electric globes, at long intervals from each other, seemed to float in the black sky, as far as eye could reach. Their light, where my eyes were concerned, was no use at all. But the little glittering bulbs attracted me, and with a certain amount of excitement, I gazed at the dim radiance surrounding each of them. Still I should have been more at my ease if I had had to find my way in completer darkness.

"We are going to walk along the ballast," said the man.

"We have to cross fifteen tracks. There would be less if we went on a little ; but I would rather we crossed here. We are farther from the bend and you can see the express coming better. You are not stumbling over the rails ? They're easy to make out. Just be careful of the signal-wires and don't get your foot caught in the points."

These warnings appeared to him to meet the case and to relieve him, for his own part, of all anxiety, for he began to walk forward with his usual step. His heavy hobnailed shoes made him surefooted on the ballast. He let his lantern hang almost to the ground, but made no use of it to light his way. He stepped over the rails and wires mechanically and kept his direction without even raising his head.

I had to exercise considerable skill in order to follow him. I twisted my ankles on the pebbles. The rails and the wires gleamed at moments in front of me, like so many traps. I could not think of the approaching express without a beginning of anguish.

We found ourselves near a sort of pylon of stonework lost among all the tracks, which barely swerved in their course to give it space. I thought I would stop there for a minute in the hope that the express would take the opportunity to pass. The standing-room itself was too restricted to reassure me, but the bulk of the pylon, so much bigger than myself, afforded me an obvious protection. I experienced something akin to affection for that mass of stone. Even were I suddenly abandoned, I said to myself, in this mechanical wilderness ; even if trains began rumbling in all directions, I should still be able to huddle here. And I murmured the word shelter to myself with so much feeling that it went to my heart.

My companion, whom I had begged to wait a moment, seemed surprised, but willing. But as I was ashamed of my fear I did not dare ask him whether the main line for the express was one of those still to be crossed. I searched the horizon myself for the three lights.

All the rails streamed away before us like a golden mane, gradually coming to a point, and rising at the same time to a spot in the black sky, where the light of the stars began. These golden threads were so perfectly rigid, they drew

together with so graceful a rhythm that the eyes seemed hardly sufficient to take in all their harmonious beauty. It seemed as though only some other sense could perceive it. And I said to myself that an effort of attention less distracted could have drawn the sound of music from those nocturnal chords.

Still the train did not come. We set off again. Again I lent all my attention in order not to lose the lantern with my eyes, to take the measure of every glittering obstacle that cut the path.

Suddenly my guide halts ; touches my arm :

" Don't move. Here comes number 117."

In effect, I do see at the end of the line a large headlight approaching rapidly, and two little ones which are distinguishable only because of their motion.

But the big light seems to occupy and threaten the entire horizon. It is impossible to guess which track it will choose or even if it will choose any of them. On the contrary, as it approaches it grows larger and the danger it forebodes seems about to sweep through all the fifteen tracks.

" Where will it pass ? "

" Behind us, miss, almost for certain, track 7. But as it is behind time it may quite likely be switched to track 10. Still, in any case, we are between numbers 8 and 9."

The glare expanded. The earth was trembling already. A rumbling surrounded the light as with another halo. The glare was coming straight at us. My impulse was not to fly from it, but to hurl myself into it.

" Here, miss, hold on to this ; then you won't be frightened."

He indicated the trellised shaft of a lamp-standard which stood in the space between the tracks. I grasped one of the iron laths and flattened myself against the shaft.

A feeling of security mingled with the vertiginous terror that possessed me. And all the time I did not stop thinking of my fingers clutching the iron strip, of the strength of my fingers, and of their flesh which was still so young ; of their obedience to my will ; of the resistance of the metal ; and of how permanent the lamp-standard seemed, standing thus among all the tracks ; and at the same time I drank in, with a sort of

intoxication, the terror that this rushing light thrust into the uttermost depths of me.

The express rushed by so close that the wind of its passage struck me like a solid body. My skirts flapped. I felt my cheeks suck in.

Not a hair of my head, as the phrase goes, was touched. But it was as though I was swallowed up in some invisible devastation, as if something had been torn from me which, though it did not bleed and was not mortal, yet in some mysterious manner was an anguish : as though the space which wraps us round so close, had not till then been separated off from me.

And even now I cannot think quite calmly of that first crossing of the fifteen tracks, of the swinging lantern, of the railwayman, or of the house among the tracks, to which I was going.

III

THE servant drew aside a curtain, opened a door and let me in. With the very first step my embarrassment became almost confusion. I was certainly not dazzled, as one can be, occasionally, on the threshold of a drawing-room. There was nothing brilliant about the apartment in which I now set foot. The light of a large lamp did no more than relegate to a distance an atmosphere that was dim and hazy ; and the familiar aspect of the furniture did no more than render a little less obvious an odour, and what was like a vision of a railway carriage at night, and a tunnel. Neither was I intimidated nor made uneasy by what remained of that very dimness or that smell.

When I try to recapture my impressions of that first moment it is always to some idea of contact that I return, so that I think of the various kinds of contact which disturb us, both by their intimacy and their unexpectedness. For instance, you are in a brown study and someone puts a hand on your neck. Or again, you plunge into a river but without realizing how chill the water is going to be, or that it will clutch your flesh so close and make you gasp.

But in this case, what unexpected, abrupt, or too startling element was present ? No doubt, when I meet a number of people I do not yet know, in a setting that is new to me, my habit is to let only the superficial aspects of myself get involved. My exterior only takes part. I look about me, I talk, and above all I listen, with very creditable self-possession. I cannot say I behave as if I were inattentive, for I endeavour, on the contrary, to attune myself, and not to shock or deceive people. And without pretending to be an observer I try to see as clearly as I can. But in all this, my real personality has not been involved, and I ask myself whether that of others is so to any greater extent. Thus while I may seem to be very conscientiously exerting myself, I am aware that my mind has

not begun to take notice, that it is still asleep in fact ; as if the great thing where it is concerned were to make the siesta as long as possible. Some people I have lived and associated with in this way for years.

On entering the Barbelenet's house, I was unconsciously preparing myself to meet a similar situation. What actually happened was destined to be altogether different, and events were to proceed, so to speak, in the reverse order.

The day following my first visit, when Marie Lemiez cross-examined me, I could give her no very animated account of anything but my negotiation of the fifteen tracks and the passing of the express. And the domestic life of the Barbelenets, what had I thought of that ? Marie Lemiez, who was always ready to lament her incapacity for describing places and persons, proved to me, by her very questions, that she had taken note of many details, the most striking of which even, had escaped my observation.

" Did you notice that amazing flowerpot-stand on a tripod to the right of the window ? It literally stares you in the face. And the portrait of Madame Barbelenet's uncle in his judge's robes, hanging over the piano ? But surely you must have looked at the side of the room where the piano is ? What a pity ; such a fine head. And Madame Barbelenet's wart ? You don't even mention it. All the majesty of Madame Barbelenet is concentrated in that wart. Her uncle's whiskers are all concentrated and mobilized in that wart ; it really seems to have a judicial and presidential character. No, definitely, I thought you had more of an eye for the curiosities of Nature."

No, I had not remarked the flowerpot-stand nor the portrait nor the wart. I was only aware of them later, in no way meritoriously, since Marie Lemiez had already drawn my attention to them.

But suppose on the contrary I had suddenly been translated at my first step far far from the Barbelenet's drawing-room, and shut up in some place of meditation like a cell ; and had I then questioned my soul as to those beings, so fleetingly glimpsed by my eyes, I believe I should have been astonished by the sureness of some of its replies.

But I was talking about my feeling of confusion, as I proceeded into the room.

At first I thought there were five people present. Two girls rose and came towards me, one from each side of the room. Then there was a man, somewhat advanced in years who rose in his turn, and a lady close to the large lamp, who remained seated.

I looked round for the fifth person, but saw no one. For a moment it made me uneasy. Then I told myself I had counted wrong, or that the fifth person must be myself.

The two girls addressed a few polite commonplaces to me. I answered mechanically, turning to the one on my right. I smiled at her. It was not she who had first spoken, nor had she seemed to have the greatest assurance. She had merely, I think, murmured a word or two. But the other had more poise, as well as being older. She scrutinized me with an air that was both affable and inquisitorial. Yet I should have had to make a certain effort for which I felt no inclination to look round at her; and my eyes, as though rolling down a slope, turned, as it were, inevitably towards the younger.

That feeling of mutual sympathy was spontaneous, so to speak. And yet it embarrassed more than it pleased me. I was relieved when M. Barbelenet approached and took up the conversation. He had the face and intonation of an old countryman. Nothing in him indicated he was in the habit of giving orders. One could not imagine him surrounded by a vast workshop, with crowds of men watching his expression and the wrinkling of his brows. It was much more easy to imagine him, hat in hand, paying his farm-rents to his landlord, or giving the details of some sickness in the family to the rural doctor, who has just pulled up in his gig.

"Well, mademoiselle," said he, "it didn't frighten you, then, coming through all that muddle of tracks? I hope the fellow I sent took proper care of you? It's not like having a house at the sea or in the Champs-Élysées. Still, you get used to it. You'll see that. Even next time you'll find your way here much more easily."

This manner of taking the next time for granted, of assuming the whole affair settled, seemed to prove him a worthy fellow.

It gave me courage to take the measure of Madame Barbelenet, who had not moved from her arm-chair. "Do please sit down," she said, pronouncing it "dew." At the end of the phrase she raised her chin a little, and removed her right hand from the arm of her chair.

I sat down. Everyone else did the same. There was a moment's silence. The light of the large lamp drew us all together. We made a sort of compact body. There was a want of space among us which was almost intolerable. Or rather I had a feeling that, instead of air, we had between us a quantity of matter which was at the same time solid and transparent.

Madame Barbelenet was sitting facing me. I observed her with a gaze that was as little detached as I could make it. I looked straight at her. But I was not aware of—no, what am I saying—I did not perceive any material detail of her person. Where was I looking? I no longer know. A sort of image of Madame Barbelenet that was purely moral, was forming in my mind, instinctively, unhesitatingly. I am not positive, to-day, that I am recapturing that first image. I can only recall the feeling which accompanied it, a sort of respectful repulsion and confiding timidity.

As for the other three I did not look at them except for an occasional glance. I did not put any question to myself regarding them; I might even say that I did not think of them at all. But there arose in my mind, quite spontaneously and very tranquilly, so that the image of Madame Barbelenet was not for a moment obscured, a procession of minor thoughts I could have believed foreign to me, so little was I conscious of having created them. And these thoughts spoke to me of the other three members of the Barbelenet family in a tone that was oddly confidential. Or rather they spoke to me of myself. For this internal gossip was concerned exclusively with the way in which each of the three Barbelenets was proceeding to elucidate and accept me.

M. Barbelenet has seated himself a little behind me and to my left. He is examining me. It surprises him, as he thinks it over, that I should have arrived without accident at his house, that has never before seemed to him so difficult to get at. He

is in doubt whether, in the hierarchy of human beings, he should link me with his wife or with his daughters. The result is he is hesitating between the two unequal forms of submission to which he is accustomed, that of a father to his daughters, or a husband to a wife of decided character. But he is not a schemer. My introduction into the family as piano teacher, the regularity of my visits from this time on, the position I shall occupy in his house, all appear to him to have been definitely established by destiny, and the only task that he sets himself now is how to adjust to this new event, so as not to collide with it clumsily ; and perhaps to ascertain how much gratification and advantage he may himself derive from it.

The younger sister, whom I feel there to my right, is looking at me with pleasure. It is only very casually that she thinks of me as a piano teacher. What is important to her in me is that I, a girl rather older than she is, have a room of my own somewhere in the centre of the town, and eat, walk, sleep where I like, spending as I please the money I earn, and perhaps even, rather poor, because I have abandoned the security of my family, having to endure certain privations which must in time grow dear to me, because my contact with life thereby becomes so much more close.

She is openly delighted because I am here. She has no serious anxiety as to the outcome of our negotiations. She would like to say to me : " Don't let yourself be put out by my mother's grand airs. In reality, it's all settled."

On my left, the older daughter was sitting in such a position that she gave me an impression of darkness ; if indeed it could have been the position that was responsible. For there was practically as much light about her as about us. I thought of her as of a body uniformly sombre. I should have been glad to have had her out of the way. It was not that I imagined her harbouring hostile or scornful impulses in respect to me. I think even that she found me tolerably well made, pleasant to look at—neither too plain, nor too elegant. But why did I think : " She doubts my talent. She is thinking that the exchange of polite nothings has lasted long enough. To suit her I ought to find a pretext to go to the piano and play a

difficult exercise calculated to show off the agility of my fingers, or some showy piece, or both, and from memory, of course. But the interview is not proceeding in that direction. It is a pity. She will have to put up with judging me by degrees. And in the meantime she will be respecting me in a sort of way, and submitting to my teaching while she is making her mind up. Yes, it's a nuisance, considering how slight the difference in our ages is. But there is another thing too. That sensation of obscurity is still what it was just now. Such thoughts as have occurred to me since, have taken nothing or almost nothing away from it. The light in this room spreads equally to left and right ; but on my left, there is this sombre body, this treacherous reef against which it breaks."

Actually, there was nothing very terrible in all this. For me, the chief concern was how to rise from my chair with the title of piano teacher to the family. The rest I could answer for. Yet it did not look as if matters were going badly. Madame Barbelenet directed the conversation with a prudence that was quite extreme, and in giving herself so much trouble, her object could not assuredly be to discover the least offensive manner of showing me the door. My title of piano teacher, I could read from her glance, had already been conferred upon me. But Madame Barbelenet was not one of those people who, because something seems to them inevitable, consider themselves released from the obligation of preparing the way for it. To guide our interview by appropriate channels to the desired conclusion still seemed to her an inevitable task. Madame Barbelenet had the feeling for ceremonial ; and of particular importance was the slipping in, at the right moment, of the assurance that we were in entire agreement as to fees. I saw clearly that there would be no bargaining, and possibly no explicit discussion of the question at all. All would be meant to arrange itself in a few half words, vague allusions. I felt I could rely on Madame Barbelenet to settle matters as naturally as drawing breath between two phrases.

But even while I congratulated myself in this way on the promising aspect of events, telling myself that none of the Barbelenets was hostile to me, and that each of the four had his or her own special manner of welcoming, or at least tolerating

me, I caught myself thinking that my business was not in reality with any single one of them, but with all together. This idea, which I might have cast aside as completely unfounded, on the contrary, obsessed me. Was that for the sake of the distressing pleasure of being able to torture myself, or so that I might, with unmeaning quibblings, ruin any pleasure I might have got from it? No sooner had I told myself again that I had no cause whatever for anxiety as regarded any one member of the family, than I instantly imagined the other three Barbelenets as an inextricably close corporation from which I had everything to fear; and if, to reassure myself, I proceeded to consider them one by one, I would suddenly make the fine discovery that they were not one but four. I did all this almost as stupidly as a certain schoolfellow of mine who, when she had read some name, found herself unable to refrain immediately from reading it backwards.

These reflections resulted in a form of anxiety, a feeling that I was in a false position, and a sense of vexation which I could not dominate. And as always, in all of us, there are perpetual impulses to defend ourselves, so I endeavoured to substitute some definite cause of fear for the uneasy bewilderment I felt, and to perceive some danger-point which my mind could attempt to subdue, in order to restore its usual composure.

At first sight Madame Barbelenet appeared to be the principal character. There could be no possible doubt of it. She sat, majestical in her arm-chair. It would be facing her, that anybody, no matter who, like myself, would sit. She it was I looked at; and she began the conversation, controlled it and took in my replies. The light itself, in which we were so narrowly confined, shed its rays over the face of Madame Barbelenet, and over her corpulent person, as if intended for her from the very first. The others seemed to me to be sitting round at our conference, attentive to whatever might concern them, and to be awaiting the outcome. And yet, in spite of myself, as water will flow into some newly discovered hollow, so my thoughts turned in the direction of the eldest girl. I was obsessed with that obscure presence whose sources were on my left. It was there, in that direction, that I felt I had to feel my way. It was there, in the sort of emptiness that the girl's

body hollowed out of the light that, as it were, expectantly. I waited for the manifestation of some essential quality.

The actual conversation was what counted least of all, so far as I was concerned, at this first visit. I realized that Madame Barbelenet had asked a certain number of courteous questions, some of which helped to round out the interview, while others were meant unobtrusively to verify what Marie Lemiez had told the family about me. The thoughts that preoccupied me, far from inducing untoward fits of inattention, allowed me to give my answers with a coolness and detachment which might have failed me in a business so little calculated to leave me indifferent.

I obtained a certain prestige from this circumstance. It was obvious that I was not someone to whom the offer of employment was a matter of life and death. And since I retained just enough self-command not to say anything stupid, my attitude had a spontaneous ease bound to create a favourable impression on Madame Barbelenet and confirm her in the opinion that I was a girl of good family.

The question of payment was so discreetly settled, that I really believe Madame Barbelenet and myself were the only people who noticed the fact. A deftly turned phrase enabled us to perceive that we were both agreed to adopt the rate proposed by Marie Lemiez.

As soon as we had arranged the day and the time for the first lesson, I rose. Madame Barbelenet took some time to get to her feet, and informed me that the state of her health obliged her to move with caution, and prevented her from accompanying me to the door. This led me to consider the question of Madame Barbelenet's health. It struck me that in the quite detailed picture of Madame Barbelenet which had formed in my mind during the course of our interview, there had been no room for the idea of an invalid. I could not refrain from telling her how astonished I was that she should be suffering from any complaint, but I did so in a way that she could take as a compliment to the appearance of health she bore.

M. Barbelenet expressed the desire to accompany me himself on my return journey across the tracks.

When we were outside the door and found ourselves once

more in the open, I proceeded to consider the question whether I was satisfied or not. I was free to choose, I seemed to hold at my disposition one feeling of joy and another of melancholy, side by side. The joy I could understand. But why the melancholy? Perhaps, quite simply, because for several hours now I had been in a state of excessive excitement and tension. Yet it did not seem due to any fatigue. I know fatigue by the taste it has of existence gone stale; and also by the indifference it inspires in us towards all that makes up the future. "Ah, to have done with it all!" that is the sigh that arises from fatigue. My own melancholy, on the contrary, I divined as something vigilant and clear, like the gaze of a seaman who perceives some sign on the horizon. As for my joy, I did not feel inclined to examine it too closely, so fearful was I lest I might conclude it ill founded. For it did not appear to have any relation to my successful day. Nor was it a continuation of the excitement which had gripped me five or six hours earlier.

As we strode over the first rails something within me cried out that it would be best not to go there again, best to turn my back upon that house for ever. Something within me cried out to all the cowardice in me. The mere act of listening to it for no more than an instant, at once caused a diminution in my anxiety and the burden of my cares, seeming to rejuvenate me, as though the load of years, accumulating on my shoulders, had suddenly slipped off.

My next step was to cross-examine my joy. I mean to say that I pondered whether the idea of not going back there again, which I had allowed a certain degree of licence, would increase or dissipate the joy in question.

Well! My joy, like a person upon whom one is spying, at first showed its front boldly. But then I felt it growing hollow, emptying; I saw it turn pale. Better leave it alone, I thought.

IV

THE first lesson took place next day, at four o'clock in the afternoon. The platelayer was waiting for me in the same place as before. It was still broad daylight. There was no train signalled. With its abundance of railway-lines and engines, without visible movement, and no other sound than the crackling of the ballast under our feet, the permanent way was only another special kind of solitude. As I walked I began to think of the bottom of a rocky ravine, then of the page of a book.

I was received by the two sisters.

"I expect," said the elder, "you found the journey a little less troublesome to-day. At night, it's a regular expedition. I'm sure you are wondering how anyone can live here."

I should have liked to tell her that, after all, their house among the tracks was something out of the ordinary, and that to me, it seemed one was bound to become as attached to it in time as to other places difficult of access. But the words would not come ; or, rather, I was too modest to utter them, as though to say them would establish, at once, a too excessive intimacy between us. Perhaps I should have spoken them had the younger sister been alone with me.

I saw that cups and slices of bread and butter had been put ready on a side-table. I also gathered from the girls' attitudes that we were to wait for someone, their mother probably.

There was much charm and penetration in the way the younger sister looked at me. I was touched by the lack of shyness she showed in my presence. I even found her trust premature, undeserved. Did she know me ? Would she not have done better, at first, to have observed me for a time ? Undoubtedly, I felt nothing but sympathy for her. But I had not particularly questioned my feelings in the matter. Nor had they been subjected to any test. Yet if so open a surrender

meant that she was in process of discovering in me more friendship for her than I thought I had, ought I not to be feeling some anxiety because of the alien intrusion on myself?

The communicating door between the dining-room and the drawing-room which, like the rest of the woodwork and hangings, was overlaid with the greasy tinge of smoke, opened slowly to admit Madame Barbelenet. The maid did not put in an appearance. The two girls, who had not heard their mother coming, were still seated when she came in. Her entrance was, none the less, impressive. To part the folding doors, Madame Barbelenet had, of course, to make use of her hands, but she did so in a manner extremely dignified. The hands of Madame Barbelenet appeared to take the place of those of an absent domestic, and the servile task affected only them, without in any way compromising the actual person of Madame Barbelenet.

Then the maid came in with tea, the steam, in those surroundings, exhaling a subtle odour of cinders, and producing a sensation of being on a journey. I could not make out what this signified. But my feeling was that the tea-party was an extra imposed by courtesy, all the more wearisome because I had not anticipated it.

Actually, everything went off simply enough. Neither Madame Barbelenet nor her daughters displayed any affectation. I was not conscious in any detail of an attempt to play the wealthy host. Yet the whole affair was very naturally ceremonious.

Though I kept on telling myself that this tea-party had no other aim than to make my first professional visit an agreeable one, I could not resist a certain feeling of apprehension. Only the most ordinary remarks were exchanged. But Madame Barbelenet was just the woman to consider that a remark of importance must always be preceded by a long procession of innocent verbiage.

Was it not their intention, to give me to understand, after much circumlocution, that the young ladies, upon due reflection, were not yet prepared to begin their studies of the piano; or that a trial would be enough to commence with, say one lesson a week, until further notice?

Already I foresaw my poverty returning. Again the hundred and forty-five francs a month, perhaps even worse. Misfortune is rarely satisfied with half measures. I should lose one or two other pupils. There would be the little enamelled dish again, the long solitary walks, the church apse and the mysterious melody in my brain. Well, so much the worse. I had not had time to break with the past and I should soon grow accustomed to it again. All that separated me from it was the intoxication of the day before, and of that I was now ashamed.

What increased my anxiety, was the fact that I was no longer aware of being able to form any distinct image of what was going on in Madame Barbelenet's brain. It was possible that the day before, I had been altogether deceived in regard to her mental attitude. But I had always had a picture of it, sufficiently vivid and plausible to remove my fear. The picture had even presented itself without any conscious effort on my part. But to-day, on the contrary, it seemed that a veil of obscurity had descended between Madame Barbelenet and myself.

At a certain point in the conversation, she had actually said : " A great many people think that girls ought to marry early."

And in that observation I had instantly perceived an indirect request to give an account of my own position : " How was it I was unmarried ? Had I made a vow of celibacy ? Is it not the case that a girl who leaves her family in order to live alone, exposes herself to certain disagreeable suspicions ? "

Then I remembered that Marie Lemiez and some of her colleagues were in the same position as myself, And Madame Barbelenet was unquestionably too loyal a supporter of the established order to admit, in principle, any suspicion as to the mode of life of persons as important as schoolmistresses.

A little later, the interview came to an end of its own accord. Madame Barbelenet appeared to be seized by a recurrence of some obscure physical affliction, which had left her in peace for the exact length of time suitable to the occasion. She indicated that she wished to rise. Her daughters assisted her to her feet, moved aside chairs and opened the door. I remained standing until Madame Barbelenet had vanished into

the still mysterious depths, so far as I was concerned, of her residence.

As soon as I was alone with the girls the lesson began. It had been arranged that they were to study together, at all events at the outset. Each was to sit down to the piano for a few minutes, during which the other would watch the performance of the exercise and profit by the correction of mistakes. They were to play in turn.

I asked which would like to begin first.

"You decide, mademoiselle," said the elder.

"Well, suppose Mademoiselle Marthe begins." The name of the younger sister was Marthe ; that of the elder, Cécile.

Marthe proceeded to seat herself at the piano, very obediently. To my great surprise, the elder sister gave her rather a black look and said :

"Just as I expected."

Since at these words, spoken between her clenched teeth, I had turned towards her, she became afraid she might have displeased me. Accordingly she assumed a light tone, which did not, however, preclude a slight confusion, and added :

"I like trying to guess what's going to happen. You see, I guessed right in this case."

In choosing Marthe I had not been swayed by any impulse of sympathy for her, quite the contrary. My intention had been to show the elder sister a little extra consideration by sparing her the embarrassment of taking the first plunge.

I sat down beside Marthe. We attempted some very simple exercises. Her hands moved over the keys near my own. They were white, a bluish white with a suspicion of green : slender, supple, remarkably free from aggressive quality. I have never seen hands less adapted for grasping. No doubt there is nothing particularly enterprising, as a rule, about the hand of a tyro as it approaches a keyboard. Even practised hands often seem to do no more than just brush the notes. But Marthe's fingers reached them with so coy a touch that it was astonishing to hear any sounds issue at all. The keys appeared to go down, not as a result of the pressure of the fingers, but in accordance with a finely adjusted connection

between some mechanism inside the piano and the light gestures of the girl.

She made few mistakes, and those she did make were the mere sketches of error. Scarcely had I had time to observe them before they were blotted out in a sequence of correctly struck notes. I noticed no signs of effort. She was very attentive, but with no appearance of exerting herself. She gave me the impression of an almost total absence of resistance. She made no resistance either to the page of music set up in front of her or to my own regulating influence. She surprised me less by anything in her which could properly be called skill, or by any positive talent, than by her display of, as it were, neutrality. "It is very likely," I thought, as I studied her, "that the human body is quite naturally capable of a great number of feats. But there is always over-tension to begin with, and we need months of experience merely to learn to relax."

She smiled at me from time to time. I thought her almost too docile. If we are offered resistance by anyone, we are gratified in a number of ways ; it gives us a pretext for exercising a certain amount of aggression, which is less fatiguing than forcing oneself to maintain a uniform level of good nature ; it challenges us to make an effort ; it enables us to anticipate an ultimate triumph. But above all it prevents us from losing our own identity in that of the person who resists us ; it helps us to feel that we are separate and different ; it reassures us as to our own capacities.

I watched her hands on the keyboard, and they seemed always too near my own. It had not occurred to me to make such an observation in the case of my other pupils. Between Marthe and myself a sense of difference had grown more quickly than one of sympathy.

The older girl, Cécile, restored my equanimity. The hands which she placed on the keyboard were slender too, but they were dry and trembled slightly. The skin, of a yellowish rose colour, covered, without hiding them, the protuberances of the flesh and the prominent knuckles. It seemed as though one could foresee the parchment-like hands of the old woman she would be in the distant future.

Her fingers hesitated over the keys, then made abrupt decisions. During the brief delay, the brain had been at considerable pains to decide what was to be done. The eyes had sped, with a haste bordering on anxiety, from the page, containing so many strict injunctions, to hands as perplexed as those of a blind person ; nor did they omit to throw a glance now and then in my direction, at which times I took advantage of the very special situation to inflate myself with a general feeling of superiority.

When she had finished I took good care not to draw attention in any way to the inequality, which had so rapidly appeared, between the two sisters. I had no hesitation, even, in being unfair. I acted in such a way as to point out the mistakes of the elder as if they had been common to both, and my sole personal censure was addressed to the younger girl, whom I begged to put more vigour into her style.

Then I asked them to play me a duet. I sat behind them. The younger one took the treble. I was counting on her to be something of a guide to her sister. Besides, the mistakes of the elder girl would have been heard more clearly in the higher notes and that would have been wounding to her self-esteem.

The exercise consisted in a series of scales related by simple changes of key which recurred periodically. Correct execution would have produced a succession of purely mechanical sounds of as little interest as the noise of a circular saw or a sewing-machine. I should soon have ceased to listen to it. But the notes which proceeded from the Barbelenets' piano formed a pattern of singular design. I closed my eyes to obtain a more accurate notion of it. The higher notes grew languidly out of each other, now slackening, now accelerating, but never jerkily ; something like the respiration of a sleeping person. They seemed to be at once cool and listless, unconcerned and tender. I felt captivated by a certain grace they had, and provoked by their lack of distinction. The bass notes succeeded each other like footsteps on a dark staircase ; a stumble, a pause, the sound of a foot striking the same stair twice, then two or three steps that seem resolute and confident, that make one hope the right direction has at last been found and that all the confusion is

over ; then, suddenly, what seems almost like a fall. In all this there was humiliation, anger, self-contempt, a longing to give it all up ; but also grim determination, the refusal to admit oneself beaten, the steady throb that denotes unimpeded vitality.

The most curious feature of the performance was the way in which the two styles complemented each other and managed to work together. The bass notes almost always came a little late. But they seemed in an ill-humoured hurry to overtake the treble ; they hurled themselves upon it ; and the treble appeared to give way, to crouch down and go underground. When the elder sister played out of tune, which happened in almost every bar, the younger, far from stressing her own playing to throw the right note into prominence, hastened to tone down her part. If I had not been there would she have gone so far in her accommodating attitude as to play out of tune herself ?

All this challenged my attention the more sharply on account of certain chords being played really out of harmony, and the clattering dissonance of a good many others, and also, if the expression may be allowed, because of the slightly musty flavour with which every sound the instrument made was impregnated.

" Which of the two sisters," I wondered, " is really the one who leads, which one on the whole takes precedence over the other ? The younger, without troubling herself much, indicates the rhythm and shows the way to the correct notes. The elder recognizes this fact and accepts it, but not in any submissive way, much more in the manner of the head of an organization appropriating the initiative of his subordinate. What will be the final outcome of the situation ? How is it affected by my presence ? I interfere as little as possible, and it is not even the case that I desire the advantage to be the younger girl's. Despite my vague sympathy for her, I am willing enough to stand by and see her undergo this process of spoliation, to which she lends herself. I do not like the elder sister ; but the energy which issues from that cross-grained body and flows out of her fingers, allures me rather. If I did not take care to restrain myself, my heart, and I am afraid my

ear, would, in the end, accept the absurd procession of wrong and corrected notes that the elder sister produces with such vigour. But, dominating the keyboard, dominating Cécile and Marthe, there is the page of printed music which the eyes that regard it cannot corrupt. And in my spirit there is a witness which considers itself in duty bound to be in harmony with that page of music. The younger sister is caught between these dual authorities. Therefore, even though she perceives the imminent recurrence of a mistake already made by her sister three lines earlier, and although she has no wish at all to stop it happening, Marthe nevertheless goes so far as to add a sharp to the D she has so humbly proffered.

The exercise over, the sisters turned round to me. I was thus deprived of the convenient situation I had occupied at their backs.

Now it is their faces and expressions I have to confront. It is my turn to speak, in a language which seems more direct than that of ascending and descending scales, but perhaps no less mysterious.

The two sisters try to make me out with more concentration than is merited by the things I say. In return for a few remarks on the passage for the thumb, I observe countenances curiously full of movement, and eyes that search me to the depths.

M. Barbelenet made his appearance when the lesson was over. His geniality, his laugh, the clasp of his hand on mine, all caused me suddenly to realize how far I was, just then, from happiness and simple cordiality, and made positively palpable the boredom I felt with the room we were in and the hour I had just lived through.

He proposed escorting me as on the day before. But whereas then we had crossed the tracks without speaking of anything but the trifling incidents of our walk, I saw that on this occasion he was seeking an opening for a more formal conversation.

"Well, mademoiselle, are you pleased with my daughters?"

"Very pleased."

"Do you think you will be able to make anything of them?"

"Why, of course."

At this point it occurred to me that M. Barbelenet was not altogether satisfied as to the value of my piano lessons, particularly lessons in such rapid succession. And without being in any way deceived in regard to M. Barbelenet's importance in his own house, I discerned in his supposed attitude a dangerous germ of trouble which ought to be removed. Accordingly I interjected a few phrases calculated to revive M. Barbelenet's interest in music and to cause him to anticipate the pleasure he would experience in the possession, at some future date, of two musical daughters.

At the same time, I felt a warm gust of self-reproach, which had the effect of rousing me to eloquence. I was angry with myself for the unhappiness which had taken possession of me at the end of the first lesson. "There you go, the moment your luck's in you start grumbling about it." Immediately I had a sudden revulsion of delight that seemed to come quite spontaneously. The railway lines, the lantern, the distant lights, the dwindling day, all gave me pleasure. I thought, with animation, that after dinner I would go and find Marie Lemiez ; that we would talk under a bright light with outbursts of philosophic merriment ; and that meanwhile a conversation such as the present one was part of the daily round that no healthy mind thinks of evading.

I saw then I was mistaken on the subject of M. Barbelenet's mental reservations. That they existed was indubitable, for when he saw we were near the end of our journey he pretended to remember that he had to make some trifling purchase of tobacco or matches in the Avenue de la Gare, and suggested he should continue to escort me so far.

"Did you know," said he, "that my eldest daughter, Cécile, is nineteen, and Marthe seventeen and a half ? They came very close together."

"How was it they waited so long before seriously taking up the piano ?"

"That's what I wonder too. Their mother used to teach them a little tonic sol-fa. Then they had two or three months' tuition, some years ago, from a master who fell ill and left the district."

" And was it of their own accord that they had the idea of making a fresh start ? "

" Oh, they'd have learnt Chinese, mademoiselle, if it had been necessary ! "

This pronouncement astonished me. He seemed quite ready to elaborate it ; and I sought to find some not too obvious phrase that would help him. But I was unsuccessful ; and he went on : " In any case, I am very glad for you to be there. As you know, I am a busy man. My wife is a sensible woman. There is no reason why I should worry. I can count on her to run the house. But girls are not as frank with their mothers as with someone of their own age. When you know them better I hope you will tell me what you think of them from time to time."

We had now reached the tobacco shop ; as M. Barbelenet evidently felt some embarrassment at the prospect of continuing the conversation in the direction it was taking in his thoughts, he recollected appropriately that he had his purchases to make.

We parted under the lights of the shop window. I suddenly saw M. Barbelenet's face very vividly, his features impressing themselves upon me very forcibly. Even to-day, when I call him to mind, my first evocation is always in the glare of that shop window, and, at the same time, I have the reminiscence of the handshake with which we separated.

His hands were only superficially those of a bureaucrat. Fundamentally, they remained those of a peasant or workman. Deeper still, in the original structure of the flesh, something I cannot quite explain, something more energetic than the mere industry of the routine worker. lay withdrawn and asleep. His hand-shake conveyed, if I may say so, a graduated impression ; there was a certain polite and gentle pressure ; next, a solid and rugged quality ; and underneath all a tightening that was rather excessive, but which failed to be disquieting on account of the feeling of assurance one got that it would lead to no kind of consequence.

For the rest, M. Barbelenet resembled fairly closely the pictures of the ancient Gauls, but on a rather milder scale. He was shorter and his forehead narrower ; the moustaches

were thick, but of moderate length ; there was no ardour in the eyes, only a startled candour. A serving-man, of the same race as his chiefs.

To get back to the town I had a rather long walk before me, which the darkness made irksome. In such a situation a connected chain of thought is an excellent thing.

Moreover, I had come to that preliminary stage of nervous excitement in which idle speculation ceases to be possible. I felt the necessity of treating myself, in my own person, as a questioner, of addressing myself in clear and completely formulated sentences, of requiring precise answers from myself, of compelling myself to agree, by sound arguments, that I held the same opinions as myself.

I congratulated myself accordingly on being in possession of two subjects of discussion which would keep me busy at least as far as the crowded streets of the centre of the town, and also on being almost certainly able to retain some portion intact for my evening talk with Marie Lemiez.

And as by nature I belong to the type of child which when it has two cakes to eat, keeps the best till the end, I was satisfied to throw merely a caressing glance at the most intriguing of my two subjects though making no beginning in that direction.

The parting words of old Barbelenet, his reticences, the details of the life of his family which they might conceal, were enough to people and lighten the gloom of many more streets than the one Avenue dela Gare. And, moreover, I imagined the exciting conversation on this topic which was in store for Marie Lemiez and myself. The two of us in her room, opposite each other, over our cups of tea ; the pleasure of comparing what we knew and our conjectures ; subtleties, laughter, some mystery and a fascinating inquisitorial atmosphere ; the delightful titillation of the brain produced by the formulation of hypotheses and anticipations.

I therefore attacked my other subject, that shone as clearly in my mind as the letters of a film title or the name of some scientific work in the window of a bookshop :

"The resemblance between the Barbelenet girls and their parents."

To tell the truth I had an immediate perception of what my conclusions would be. But the Avenue de la Gare was long, so I put off reaching my conclusions until I had arrived at the end of the avenue, in the halo of the last lamp-post.

First of all the father. What does Cécile inherit from him? A certain ruggedness of character? Possibly. But only if we are not too meticulous in our definition. For the father is distinctly rough, but not the daughter. The father lacks will-power and authority. But if I talk of ruggedness in connection with the daughter, I am thinking of her will, which seems to me firm to the point of obstinacy.

What of the younger sister? How does she resemble her father? I find nothing but discrepancies. No, I exaggerate. Marthe is weak, yielding, candid and perhaps, also rather heedless, she has that gift of being able to "think of something else," which is already implicit in the ingenuous gaze of the father. Yes, that's probable.

If I now confide these deductions to Marie Lemiez she will be sure to remind me that there are all sorts of reasons, according to the best authors, why daughters should not resemble their fathers. I fear indeed, that she may be inclined to underline the pleasantry too heavily.

But is the resemblance any more marked between Madame Barbelenet and her daughters? The strength of character I associate with Cécile is not in the least like the presidential authority of Madame Barbelenet. It is clear that Madame Barbelenet takes her duties seriously. There is nothing disagreeable to her in having to knit her brows a little, and it heightens her sense of responsibility. But I imagine her capable of taking on still heavier obligations without any real ruffling of her serenity. It may, perhaps, be cruel of me, but my feeling about her is that even to her very health the progress towards a mortal issue is taken with the smallest steps. Call it domination or lordly indifference, or what you will. Cécile is differently made. With her there is no question of serenity, even of laborious serenity. I do not know whether she is enthusiastic, in the truest sense of the word; but I am certain,

already, that there are many circumstances capable of exciting her to the point of exhaustion. Nor is there anything majestic about her, either, even for her age. Austere, perhaps ; sombre, yes, sombre. There is so little of that in the father.

As for the younger sister, how compare her with her mother ? By the touch of heedlessness ? I have already dealt with that in considering the father. That would be too easy. One may speak of a certain lordly indifference in the character of Madame Barbelenet. But of her heedlessness ? Assuredly not.

I was on the point of confessing to myself that my discussion or the matter led nowhere and that the conclusions, which I had half seen earlier, had vanished into thin air while I was making such elaborate shifts to capture them, when I realized that it had at least had the merit of bringing me at a round pace as far as the rue Saint-Blaise in all its brisk illumination.

My evening with Marie Lemiez was quite as pleasant as I had anticipated, but it had its element of unexpectedness for all that. We met in her room. She had amused herself by pretending it was to be a regular little reception. She had gone to the expense of extra lights, serviettes and cakes. I was touched. Marie had seemed a little inattentive during my period of distress. But the manner in which she had organized something like a party to celebrate my new prosperity, I thought very charming in her. Is not a heart that rejoices in another's fortune as generous as one that mourns its woe ? And since nothing refreshes me more than to think well of my friends, I felt buoyant and cheerful the moment I arrived.

Marie exacted an accurate report of my visit from me. My interview with Madame Barbelenet made her laugh a great deal. But when I came to the details of my return, and the observations of M. Barbelenet, she exclaimed :

"What ! He had the cheek to say ' I am very glad for you to be there ! ' And what about me then ? Don't I count ? I've been calling at his house for more than a year now and he hasn't yet noticed me. Wasn't a whole year long enough for me to be thought worthy of the old gentleman's confidence ? Well, it's a bit thick, I must say !"

She laughed, folded her arms, exaggerated, in a joking way, the extent of her indignation. She really was a little vexed.

"But, my dear Marie, you don't see that you are too much respected to be made a confidant of. You impress people, you know, though not quite so much as Madame Barbelenet. Me, on the other hand, no one troubles about."

I then distracted the attention of Marie Lemiez from this slight sting to her self-esteem, in order to lead her to the subject uppermost in my mind.

"What did he want me to understand exactly? He may not have confided in you; but you must have observed a good deal since you have been going to the house."

Marie was on the point, at first, of confessing to me that she had never found any sort of clue to the mystery, and that she was counting far more on me to satisfy our mutual curiosity. Then, blushing slightly, she assumed the expression of a witness who, before giving his testimony, collects his impressions and weighs his words.

I could have kissed her for taking so much trouble. Her efforts were far less concerned with excusing herself for her lack of vision than with attempting to spare me any feeling of disappointment.

Her first words, uttered without overmuch conviction, were to the effect that she thought she had observed the existence of a certain lack of harmony in the Barbelenet family.

"I should not be surprised if they have had disputes from time to time about their daughters' future. It's the mother especially who wants them to continue their studies. Why? I'm not too sure of the reason. Perhaps because she has no son. You see what I mean? A son who would pass first into the Polytechnic is what would really suit her. I can very well imagine her declaring: 'I urged on my son's education until he was ready for the Polytechnic, and I made up my mind he should be number one on the list.' Thus she has to fall back on her daughters. The father, who is a simple fellow, must, I should think, be in opposition to her schemes either more or less openly."

"But, if that were so, surely he would never have addressed himself to me as a possible ally? He'd hardly congratulate

himself on the arrival of yet another teacher in his house ? ”

“ He's not capable of such deep reasoning. So far as he's concerned I'm a blue-stocking and it's my business to manufacture other blue-stockings. But music he puts into another category altogether. I have even heard him say he used to play the flute himself, as a young man, and that he regretted not having kept it up. No, he doesn't think there's anything dangerous about the piano. On the contrary, it's an ‘ accomplishment ’ and ‘ accomplishments ’ lead to marriage.”

“ But then, you and I represent two opposing principles in the Barbelenet household ? I think that's dreadful.”

“ Not at all, Lucienne darling. It's a most amusing situation. Old Barbelenet is a splendid fellow whose hostility will never be anything to be afraid of. There will be occasions when he will unbosom himself to you while helping you across the lines ; and he will choose the days on which you give your lessons to lay in his stocks of tobacco and matches. Nor will that prevent him treating me with paternal benevolence and letting his wife have the last word.”

I had an answer ready for her. It seemed as though we were talking animatedly, having a regular debate and urging contrary opinions. But I perceived that I had ceased to attach any importance to the truth of whatever we might say. The ideas of Marie Lemiez since they no longer met any serious resistance from me, gradually acquired a certain plausibility to herself, and the faith which she finally accorded them was not far from becoming mine too. It seemed clear to me that the truth could not really lie in that direction, but I scarcely cared whether it did or not. What does truth matter, I thought, in comparison with friendship ? I am not so very anxious, for the moment, to know the exact significance of old Barbelenet's peculiarities. I even believe that I would prefer not to know just yet. What I would like is to maintain and augment the happiness we both experience at this particular instant, a feeling which it is rare to have in such plenitude and purity, drawing its sustenance from words, it is true, but more from their warmth than from their sense.

Marie is seated opposite to me ; sometimes she gets up to make fresh tea. As she moves about she talks and laughs.

When she is in her tiny kitchen on the other side of the partition, I can hear her moving the saucepan, coughing a little, lighting, then regulating the gas. Even that is enough to give me a certain amount of pleasure. But she also tries to make herself heard from her new position ; there is a constant exchange of words between us, streaming backwards and forwards. The walls, the arrangement of the lodging, the planning decided on by the people who built the house, certainly with no thoughts of us, make no difference whatever to our ability to remain in each other's presence, and cannot stop the communication, the traffic, between her and myself.

Then we remain silent for a few minutes, she at her stove, I in my arm-chair. And it seems then as though a hushed vacancy prevails in the very shape of the room and keeps us apart. But I cannot really call it either a vacancy or a hush. On the contrary it all gives me a sensation of fullness, abundance and sparkling good humour. I should like to compare it with champagne bubbling over the brim of a glass.

Nevertheless, there seems a compulsion to go on talking of the Barbelenets ; a feeling that the conversation must not languish while Marie is making tea in the kitchen. The distance between us is so small that we are not obliged to be silent unless we are too lazy to raise our voices a little. So much the worse if Marie Lemiez turns out to be wrong in imputing merely imaginary dissensions to the Barbelenets. It can't be helped if I am weak enough to acquiesce. The Barbelenet family is an important one to us, this evening ; it contributes to some extent to our hilarity, more than I think, perhaps. If they did not exist in their house out yonder, on the other side of the welter of rails, with us here, we two, in this flat in the centre of the town, consisting of bed-sitting-room, lobby, and kitchen recess, in this rather complicated sea-shell of a place that we have somehow to fill with our presence: if our talk drifted away from them, what would become of our cheerful mood, of our pleasure in being together, of this sudden radiance of friendship, so strong an influence to-night, to combat our solitary lives ?

V

A FORTNIGHT later, in the course of one of my lessons, I was induced to promise the two girls that I should bring a "difficult" piece of music with me next day, to play over to them as a treat. At the outset of our association, I had been careful to avoid anything which might be construed as a proof of my capacity. But in those fifteen days their curiosity about me had already changed its character. The mere way in which I had supervised their studies had reassured them on the subject of my professional knowledge. At most, the elder sister may have wondered what was my position in the hierarchy which distinguishes a mere good teacher from an illustrious virtuoso. As for the younger, she had never had any doubts about me, but she wanted to hear me play, to some extent for the sake of the pleasure to be derived from the performance itself, but above all to have an opportunity to admire me.

Accordingly, next day, I arrived with a volume of sonatas under my arm. I felt certain that Madame Barbelenet would find some excuse to come and listen too, and even foresaw the dawn of tea and bread and butter above the horizon, but resigned myself good-humouredly to the infliction of that little ceremony.

The maid showed me into the drawing-room. Before I had time to look at anything I knew the whole family was present. But, as on the day of my first visit, I had the impression that there were five people confronting me. It was so completely similar an impression, that at first I believed that my previous illusion was repeating itself, or simply, that I was recalling it. To get rid of it, I concentrated my gaze upon first one and then another of the people present. I then saw that there really were five of them, apart from myself, and not four. The fifth was a young man in dark clothes, brown-skinned and clean-shaven, seated, as I arrived, between M. Barbelenet and Cécile.

I seem to remember that M. Barbelenet mumbled a few words of introduction. But as soon as everyone had sat down, Madame Barbelenet took charge of the conversation.

With great deliberation, but without excessive circumlocution, she gave something like an official statement of the situation. She said, in short, what was necessary to assure us all that her presence and that of the others was in no way remarkable, that her daughters had been unable to refrain from telling her the promise they had obtained and that the family was conscious of its great indiscretion, but begged me to excuse it, and not take exception at people whose distractions were so rare. Also that the girls had already formed so lofty an opinion of their teacher and had so sedulously circulated it, that nobody in the house had been able to resist the desire to hear me, and that the maid even, it was to be feared, would glue her ear to the door. As to M. Pierre Febvre, their distant cousin, whom I should undoubtedly have the opportunity of meeting on future occasions, since he happened just then to be visiting them, they had asked him to stay so that he might have the pleasure of making my acquaintance, and it was hoped I should not be so cruel as to insist on his departure as a condition of sitting down to the piano.

During this speech, I had kept my eyes fixed upon Madame Barbelenet. I examined her face with an excessive attention that was almost inappropriate, yet without missing a word of what she said. Her features appeared to me one after the other, detached, and even enlarged, in an illumination of which I felt myself the source, while the flow of her observations like a fine-toothed wheel, bit remorselessly into my spirit. Her face and discourse seemed so closely connected that in the end they resolved themselves, for me, into a single entity. Each feature and each word sprang into prominence with the same movement, as if they were welded together. The two factors appeared to me to be identical in nature and always to have been so. The maid listening at the door, made a simultaneous entry into my consciousness with the granular surface and greyish tufted hairs of Madame Barbelenet's wart. The name of M. Pierre Febvre struck my senses in such close alliance with the left eyelid slightly swollen and tremulous—of

Madame Barbelenet, that I lifted my eyes up to her eyebrow and the first wrinkle of her forehead, as though to hasten the delivery of whatever she had to say on the subject of M. Pierre Febvre.

With such a character as I know myself to have this might well have put me in an ill humour. I had resigned myself to the eventuality of Madame Barbelenet's presence, but I had not foreseen the possibility of such an exhibition as this. I told myself with emphasis that my good nature was being abused, that these people had no tact and that I was most annoyed. But in reality, I was in no way desirous of being elsewhere, or of being exempted by some miracle from acting my part in what was about to happen. I do not say that in my secret thoughts I found the circumstances frankly agreeable ; but certainly they interested me. An hour of scale-practice with two young provincial girls of the respectable middle-classes was not anything to get particularly excited about. It's as little like an adventure as anything could well be. In short, instead of an insipid task, I was being given one that had a certain relish.

For the first time after a long interval I was to have an audience. As Marthe poured out tea and Cécile handed us cakes, I wondered which of my sonatas was most suitable ; but chiefly I was thinking of the extraordinary difference there can be in the repetition of identical actions. The same sonata could be played when I was alone or with a pupil, or again, before a small audience like to-day's, or quite alone, in my room on an evening when I was tired or depressed, or when I felt in the air and in the walls the presence of a kind of call to play. Quite alone. The first notes of the piano make me tremble. Deep-toned harmonies turn on their hinges like double gates of bronze. It seems as though hidden future events, already complete in every detail, only await this signal to hurry into life. A dreary tranquillity lies broken. A lying covenant has been torn to pieces. What seemed most important and brought a frown a moment since, now I can scarcely define. Out of the corner of my eye I see it take flight and vanish. The soul advances, with hurrying stride and labouring breath against all those forms that crumple up before it. It is as though the

world were ending. A sort of Last Judgment is set up somewhere amid the ruins, and the first decrees of a world that is to be eternal are all but inaudible in the turmoil of the catastrophe.

I must not even think of it too much or I shall be unable, soon, to take my place on the horrible black spiral piano-stool, which, dominated on high by the portrait of the uncle, once a Judge—seems to me now the chief exhibit in some legal action. And since I cannot muster up the courage to fly, I shall have to stay—pitiably paralysed.

I must push away the memory of my room, repel the sudden intoxication that solitude means to me. With a little willingness I can extract some pleasure from what is about to happen. To perform something beautiful in front of people who only half understand, can hardly seem thrilling, but the event itself will no doubt be richer in sensation than the idea I make of it, for I feel clearly that my heart of hearts does not despise it.

I have merely to sit down calmly at the piano-stool, and not think definitely of anyone ; neither of Madame Barbelenet, nor of her eldest daughter, nor of this newcomer. I know it will not be easy. It will be necessary to curb a wretched suspiciousness that I have, which disappears quickly enough when I am alone, but which is constantly on the alert when anyone is about. " Will Madame Barbelenet think my sonata brilliant enough for a family reunion like this ? Will Cécile be clever enough to notice how difficult the execution is, and will she be willing to admit, without reserve, that I really am proficient ? Does this gentleman, Pierre Febvre, know anything about music ? Hasn't he specially been asked, so that they can hear his opinion and be guided by it ? And in that case, is he one of those pseudo-connoisseurs, so much more dangerous than the perfectly ignorant ; or is he a genuine lover of music. Ought I to play in such a manner as to impress the pseudo-connoisseur in him ? Or ought I, on the contrary, to call his attention, as a genuine lover of music, to certain subtleties of style, and make them serve as terms of a mutual understanding ? "

All these questions I must try to set aside and keep under proper control. I cannot prevent their birth in my conscious-

ness, and perhaps it is not a bad thing to maintain them at the back of my mind. But they must remain in abeyance.

I must take my place now. . . . The time is just ripe for our little performance. The various remarks, to which I have lent myself without resistance, have come to a full stop with : "Mademoiselle, we are all listening."

I am at the piano. A glance at the keyboard, at the polished woodwork of the case, and the lighted candle on my left has reassured me as to how I feel. When I am conscious of objects in that particular way, when the reflection of light in a piece of furniture, some gleaming contour, or flame, instead of just coldly notifying me of its existence, takes on a certain character of intensity and solemnity and looks me, so to speak, in the eyes, I know that my heart is in what I am doing ; I know that it will take part in the acts I am about to perform, will bring to them its peculiar needs and resources, and especially that astonishing power of seeking out its joy just where it lies hidden.

I begin to play. The piano is practically in tune. The mustiness of its tone seems merely an antique flavour now.

From the very first notes, I feel things will not go so badly. There is no need for me to fear to-day that type of nervous perplexity which sometimes affects a hundred separate areas of the head and body, and especially the wrists, the palms and finger-ends, and makes of each of our gestures a series of knots that must be untied.

On the whole my feelings are pleasurable. There is no welling up of the soul, as when I play alone in my room. But on the other hand my satisfaction is not one of simple vanity. No doubt I am flattered to think of the effort all these people have made on my account and the respectful hearing they are according me. I am enjoying a quarter of an hour of acknowledged superiority. I am no longer a poor girl who works for her living. These two middle-class girls, with their substantial dowries, are sitting there admiring and envying me, for as long, anyhow, as the breath of my music blows, and until silence permits the return of shallower thoughts and a more reasonable attitude to life. But there is a further element in my pleasure. How comes it that I see suddenly a little

country church and the modest, though secular, celebration of a rite, in front of a handful of peasants ? An old woman leans against a pillar ; you hear the beads dropping one by one and the drone of the harmonium. Nothing very awe-inspiring, and certainly, no prophetic rage ; no ecstasy of the cell ; but the atmosphere of devotion is unmistakable.

The fears I cast aside just now are still about me, but at a respectful distance. I can distinguish them, but they do not importune me. In my pleasure of the moment there are no fogs to cloud my view. All my surroundings, everything in the situation I am in, the people round me, I picture as clearly as the chord I am at this moment striking, and neither the three accidentals in that chord, nor the way my first two fingers must twist to strike them can dull me to the feeling that I get from my audience ; quite the contrary in fact. It is as though my images sharpened themselves upon each other.

There are the four Barbelenets, of whose respective positions in the room I am more than conscious. Marthe, fairly close to me, rising from time to time to turn my page, but always a little late—and Madame Barbelenet, with a fairly wide space between her and Marthe. Then the line of the family takes a bend so as to include M. Barbelenet, who sits a little back, and then returns to end with the elder daughter, Cécile, who is immediately behind me.

As for M. Pierre Febvre, I am not forgetting him. But I am not including him with the family either. I am very conscious of his presence there. Why do I try to imagine what I should feel like if there were only him and myself in the room, he seated where he is now, and I at the piano as at this moment ? I tell myself my fingers would stiffen, my eyes would no longer see the notes, that I could not manage to go on playing.

And yet, as it is, the case is quite otherwise. His presence, added to that of the family, makes me take more interest in my playing, prevents me from slipping into a dull facility, causes me to see each line of the score as an attractive adventure, which it is meritorious and pleasurable to bring to a successful conclusion. His presence has the pungent effect of a spice. I even assume that I should have a less attentive audience if he

were not present. For they are listening to me with a concentration for which I did not dare to hope, which I feel flowing in upon me, supporting me, receiving and returning to me the fluctuations of my playing with a sort of elasticity, and which even goes so far as to suffuse the two outspread pages of my music book, as though to enhance the light upon them and liven up the sense.

When the sonata is over, I turn round. I listen absently to the compliments they make me. I look into their faces. I meet eyes that are distinctly animated. The brown eyes of Marthe sparkle with a light which, while it expresses very great ardour, seems deeper and more sombre even than it usually is ; it is a gleam that quivers and strains forward, like a kiss, to reach something. But what ? What is there meant for me in those eyes ? What for the music, and what for something else I cannot divine ?

I do not dare turn openly to Cécile. Yet I should have loved to see her face. I feel inclined to say something that will flatter her, for instance, ask her what she thinks of the sonata, or tell her—which is not my opinion at all—that I believe her to have a special gift which will enable her to play such pieces later on. Her grey-green eyes, at which I steal a covert look, are fixed in front of her in a sort of hard suffering. I wish I could cause her to utter the words which would bring relief to her expression. But something prevents me. More than before, even, she gives me an impression as of some sombre presence.

M. Pierre Febvre leaves his place. Slowly, and passing by the family, he approaches the piano and casts a look at the score. His eyes are black like Marthe's, but truly black and without any trace, it seems to me, of gold or red in them. His movements as he rose and walked to me were free and easy. Now he is standing quite close. He turns the pages I have been playing. Merely by the slight twitch that moves an eyelid and a nostril, I gather that he has found the most significant passage in the sonata, the one I like best, and that he is about to give himself the luxury of inwardly repeating it to himself.

It is clear he understands music and has a taste for it. His very fashion of holding the volume and bending back the pages

is that of a man familiar with such things. Perhaps he is not displeased at my noticing it ; and I am grateful to him, for having said practically nothing.

A moment earlier Madame Barbelenet had taken the initiative in expressing the congratulations of the party to me :

" Mademoiselle, you are positively enchanting to listen to ; one doesn't know which to admire most, the nimbleness of your fingers in those passages which seem a little like dance music, or the expression you put into the sentimental passages."

She bent, as she finished her sentence, in the direction of M. Pierre Febvre, as though to ask him to bear her out. But he was content to answer :

" Mademoiselle plays extremely well."

As for M. Barbelenet, his appearance is frankly one of rapture. He reminds me of a country squire who has just presented his guests with a bottle of wine from his own vineyards, and is so intoxicated with their appreciation that he has no need to drink himself.

I was entreated to play something else. M. Pierre Febvre sat down, no longer between Cécile and M. Barbelenet, but between Madame Barbelenet and Marthe. I could not prevent myself from making a mental note of this change of position, nor from taking it as a point of departure for an adventurous meditation on the young man's relation to the family. And, as I rebuked myself for associating vulgar speculations with sublime music I reflected that M. Pierre Febvre's age and looks seemed very appropriate to the situation of fiancé in that household. His kinship with the Barbelenets is no obstacle. No doubt his attitude remains reserved, which prevents my discovering which of the two girls he prefers. But there is nothing surprising in his discretion in front of a stranger like myself, nor is it unnatural in a man of breeding.

I ought to add that this idea rather disturbed me. Even judged merely from his external appearance, it was clear the man Pierre Febvre was of quite a different type from the people of the house. There was nothing affected in his bearing. I think, indeed, he would rather have endeavoured to keep on the level of his hosts ! But it was enough to look at him for a second merely to make Madame Barbelenet seem suddenly

like a caricature, and to cast the Barbelenet girls back into a slough of provincial stupidity. Was it possible to imagine him, as a lover, under the patronage and supervision of that effigy of the uncle who had been a judge?

If he was thinking of marrying, what was one to think of his character? Either his tastes were completely satisfied by his entirely commonplace household, in which case he was only a disguised or veneered Barbelenet himself, and therefore less sincere and less interesting; or else he had scented the existence of a substantial dowry under the modest outward aspect of the family, and so his temperament was base. I saw him still turning over the leaves of my music book, folding them, making the thickness of the sheets bulge against the palm of his hand. The gesture, which had been a pleasing one, now seemed somewhat disagreeable. I looked at my handsome gleaming pages as though I should find an imprint on them as of greasy skin.

When I returned to my seat beside my tea-cup I was still thinking this thought. It was not a disagreeable preoccupation, if only because it made me less conscious of the wearisome banality of the remarks being addressed to me and the replies I had to make.

This gentleman seems to me "distinguished" I told myself; and he continues to seem so, despite what I have just been thinking. What is that due to? For it is a good rule to be able to verify impressions that will govern one's attitude to this or that person. Is my judgment of him really my own, corresponding to what I imagine constitutes distinction, or is my view that of everyone else? Am I now thinking, by proxy, for the lady in charge of the bookstall or the tobacco shop, or for the travellers in a railway compartment into which M. Pierre Febvre has just entered? And more likely still, have I not seen him through Marthe's or Cécile's eyes?

It is obvious that his clothes are in good taste. But I have never, so far, troubled to find out what my taste is in the matter of masculine attire.

His clothes cannot have cost more than those of old Barbelenet; and they seem to me a little older. It is not that they are so much more in the fashion or of so much better a cut. But the creases seem to have a lively, brisk and meaningful character

instead of being dreary folds in the stuff. The material itself, which I think is black, has been well chosen. In combination with the small black knot of the tie, it sets off the pallor of the face and gives more emphasis to the eyes. But in particular it brings to mind the atmosphere of receptions, jewels, and brilliantly lit gatherings. And as it shows evidences of wear, rubbing and slight traces of dust and tobacco ash, the sense of ceremonial is quickly obliterated by an indefinable impression of something still more free. The suggestion of stale worldly elegance is left far behind. That same impulse of the soul that has just evoked an image of glittering life and brought its very agitation to life, ends in nonchalance and disdain.

But must one necessarily attach so much significance to factors whose coming together may be quite an accident? His face, the face alone, what does that signify? The eyes, I thought, were rather fine. I almost wanted to say very fine. But one meets plenty of others which have no less depth or sparkle, and yet cannot redeem the coarseness of the face. There is even a certain beauty of the eyes which has a particular affinity to the baser forms of the struggle for happiness.

Does the distinction then lie in the ensemble of the features? Possibly. I am still not sure, yet I see very well how this shaven face differs from that of a priest. But what prevents me thinking that it may be that of a provincial actor, or a manservant's? I must have the courage to try to answer these questions.

I had reached this point in my reflections, when I observed from a slight variation in her expression that Madame Barbelet had at last noticed how little attention I was paying to the conversation and, by way of contrast, the concentration with which I was studying M. Pierre Febvre.

Whatever would they think of me? It was unlikely that Madame Barbelenet was one of those people who, through indifference or delicacy, abstain from interpreting the behaviour of others, when it is not self explanatory. On the other hand, could she possibly guess the true nature of my curiosity or its impersonal quality?

I contrived not to blush, but I was in an agony for many minutes. What remained of my presence of mind was engaged in

undeceiving Madame Barbelenet without the help of speech.

I began to tell myself, using all my concentration, and directing my thoughts at Madame Barbelenet : " I am interested in your cousin in exactly the way I might feel about a vase or the portrait of your uncle over the piano. Don't go and imagine anything silly. If I must go into details, let me admit that I have been a little lacking in discretion, in regard to your family. I wanted to guess if by chance this gentleman might not be the fiancé of your daughter Cécile or of your daughter Marthe. Honestly ! And strange, I have the face to be still thinking about it. You must have surprised the glance I threw at Cécile and then at your cousin just now, as if they had been a pair of candelabra I was trying to match. And now, you see, I am comparing Cécile with Marthe ; and then, narrowing my eye like a dilettante critic or a painter posing his model, I set Marthe and M. Pierre Febvre side by side as if to decide the possibilities of their making a pair."

All this tactic did not prevent me from taking a much more active part in the conversation, which at that moment was on the subject of the inadequacy of the local shops and the necessity for making all important purchases in Paris. I even contributed a certain volubility and assurance to it which, no doubt, would very much have annoyed me in another.

I think I obtained more than half the result I desired. In any case I had awakened in Madame Barbelenet a number of more personal preoccupations which could not fail to engross her attention. Whether there was or was not a project of marriage, it was sufficient for Madame Barbelenet to feel that I was obsessed by the notion of it, to convince her immediately that it was her duty to protect her family against the inroads of a stranger's thoughts. Anything else could, for the moment, in her view be disregarded.

Madame Barbelenet could not assume such an attitude without revealing herself to a certain extent. The manner of defence is not the same, even mentally, against a supposition that is true and one that is false. If my head had been clearer, I should perhaps have solved the problem of the engagement there and then. But it was enough at the moment to have thrust aside I hardly know what absurd suspicion,

VI

THE next morning, about ten o'clock, I happened to be in the rue Saint-Blaise at the spot where it meets the rue de l'Huile and the narrow street called Devant-de-la-Boucherie.

I had been giving a lesson. I was in good spirits. There was nothing to fetter my liberty before lunch.

I was meaning to stroll through the old streets in the centre of the town, the hour being that at which housewives do their marketing, and at which the shops, crammed with customers and various commodities, contribute as much gaiety to the pavements as if they were so many public illuminations or bushes full of birds.

Everything around me imparted a desire to be in motion—to walk, to come to a standstill, to look at something or other, to cross the street, walk on again—but not the least wish to go anywhere else.

Here is where I want to be, I thought. If I come to the end of the street I shall have to decide how to return, either by taking the other side of the street or by first pretending to lose myself in two or three tiny side streets.

Here, in the midst of the town, is the feeling of being self-sufficient, of finding happiness in one's own self. The rest of the world retreats to the circumference of thought, flows back and shatters its waves so far away that they can be neither seen nor heard, so to speak, any more ; scarcely is there so much as a confused murmur of memories, not one of which is definite enough to be recognized and afflict one with nostalgia.

I think furtively of the railway station ; just long enough to experience in contrast the satisfaction that the coming together of the rue Saint-Blaise, the rue de l'Huile and the narrow one called Devant-de-la-Boucherie, make available for me. The station, the platforms, the railway lines, the perpetual draughts, the sentence of departure, all the turmoil of the soul, every

pathetic and tremulous phrase rising to the lips ; still vaguer, the throbbing heart-beat which, when we listen to it, floods us with vague gusts of words like : " flight," " uprooted," " exile," " through and through " ; then a vision of something like a hand closing vainly on some slippery creature. Enough !

I am in good spirits here at this moment, at ten o'clock in the morning, ten o'clock in the sunshine, here in the rue Saint-Blaise. I have just finished a short spell of work in a house that is still close by, which is part of the comforting urban solidity I feel all round me. I have a right to live, to do that only, till midday or longer even, right into the other heavy-hanging half of the day. I too am plying a trade, earning money. The cobbler and I can look at each other across the glue-pot and the row of freshly-mended soles, with the friendliness of reputable citizens.

I am no mere passer-by, not I. I am an inhabitant of this place. I have a position here, and it is not such a bad one. Those for whom I work esteem me, even after paying my fees. My work is rather exceptional and has a special sort of excellence, something that is not just anything, something difficult to replace, which is not true to the same extent for the shoe-soles, however smart and pleasantly smelling they may be. I earn much less than the doctors or solicitors, but that is a purely accidental inferiority. The best doctor here, M. Lanfranc, were he acquainted with me, would not fail to raise his hat without the least shade of condescension.

The money I have just earned in the space of an hour—one hour only—and that hour such a convenient one, from nine to ten, is yet early enough to leave me, when it is over, a morning of leisure like a rich woman, though late enough to exempt me from the necessity of getting up at daybreak like a working-girl. A really comfortable hour, into which the work of getting one's living can be packed without any risk of it being against the grain, for it is the moment when the night's repose has produced its most stimulating affect, and the pleasant bitterness of coffee is still circulating through one's body. Yes, the sum I have just gained may seem trifling, so long as it stays in my little bag as a coin. But all it asks is to emerge from the silver which imprisons it ; all it asks is to escape and

expand in the favourable atmosphere of this street, and grow into, for instance, three dozen eggs, or a fat chicken ready plucked and dressed, or a whole heap of these jolly looking vegetables, jostling each other on the shelves of the greengrocer's like the crowd at a circus.

There are, in fact, certain things I must buy. If I confined myself merely to strolling and staring about, a certain element of earnestness and conviction would be lacking in my pleasure. But since I take my evening meal in my room, it is quite appropriate for me, instead of waiting till the end of the day, when this gorgeous display will have wilted somewhat, to get in my supplies when housewives get theirs.

Such was the restless current of the thoughts which swept me along and which the memory of my previous evening at the Barbelenet's impinged on sometimes, though without interrupting their flow ; memories of a certain feeling or face, or the reflection of a candle on the page of music ; but more precisely still, the repetition of all the soul's colour surging at that moment through the breach made by memory.

I finally entered a shop in which half a dozen customers were waiting to be served, while they fingered the lettuces, potatoes or cheeses.

I thought I recognized one of these women. She was about forty years old and seemed to have something both of the housewife and the domestic servant in her appearance. I wondered, for some time, where I had seen her before.

What first came to mind, in connection with her, was an impression, agreeable enough, though tinged with anxiety ; and dating not far back. Then a feeling that there was no hidden reason for regretting this encounter or that necessitated averting my head to avoid recognition. My next thought was of the small tuft of greyish hair that sprang from Madame Barbelenet's wart, possibly because at that moment my glance had fallen on a leek.

But it was only when the woman came up and spoke to me, that I recognized in her the Barbelenets' maid.

She struck me, in the setting of the shop's interior, as plumper, pinker, and above all far less insignificant than in her employer's house. It is true that I had scarcely looked at her

there. Even the previous evening I had hardly noticed the admiration with which she helped me on with my coat.

"I see you too, mademoiselle, are doing your shopping for lunch?"

"Oh no, I have my meals at the Ecu . . ." (that was the name of my hotel, the best in the town.) "But there are a few little things I must buy."

"You gave us a real treat yesterday, mademoiselle. It was possible to hear you quite well, even in the kitchen. I can tell you the young ladies were proud of their teacher."

"That was very charming of them. Did they tell you so?"

"Not me personally; but everyone was talking about it at table."

Everyone meant the Barbelenet family, with the addition, no doubt, of M. Pierre Febvre, who must have stayed to dinner. I should very much have liked to know if he had expressed any opinion about me, about myself as a pianist. But how could I put the question?

The servant left the shop with me. Once in the street she seemed on the point of going, but at the very moment when there was nothing for it but to say good-bye she became extraordinarily talkative.

It occurred to me later that all this verbosity had had a purpose, rather in the manner that a sling is whirled faster and faster until the stone flies off. For after having unwillingly given my attention to a very whirlwind of words in which piano playing, vegetables, the price of eggs, the pleasure of being young, were mingled pell-mell, I was struck by this remark:

"Ah, mademoiselle, it is easy to blame the parents; but when it is one's children's happiness that has to be considered, it is not so easy."

I shook my head as encouragingly as possible.

"You might say I should do better to keep to my cooking, but all the same, I should like to know what you personally think of this marriage."

"Oh, I don't attach much importance to it."

"Not much importance, yes, that's just the right expression. Not much importance. But tell me, that young man is

certainly a very nice fellow, don't you think, though personally I don't much care for people who can't make their minds up. Do you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Is he or isn't he old enough to know what he's about?"

"It would seem so."

"If they'd been my girls, I can tell you I should soon have known where we were."

"But you don't think it is likely to happen?"

"Happen! How? Suppose he marries the younger. That would be pretty fine, wouldn't it? The elder one would rather anything but that, and I can quite sympathize. Don't forget that, to begin with, Mademoiselle Marthe didn't come into it at all. The parents' original idea was always to marry the elder first. Besides, if it hadn't been for things happening as they have, madame would have preferred to wait until M. Barbelenet retires in a year or two."

"It's a pity it's so complicated."

"It is a pity. You haven't been coming to the house long, but I can see you already know pretty well what's going on. Otherwise, of course, I wouldn't have thought of mentioning it to you. It's very natural the young ladies should not conceal anything from you. Who is there could advise them better?"

"Oh, do you think so?"

"Certainly I do. I can tell from your manner that you wouldn't think it worth your while to waste time on obstinate people. And there's no doubt, that in spite of her gentle and coaxing manner, Mademoiselle Marthe is no easier to lead than anybody else. But all the same, personally, I should get on better with her than with Mademoiselle Cécile. Still, I don't say that Mademoiselle Cécile may not in reality have the deeper nature. For instance, Mademoiselle Marthe naturally loves her mother, since she is her mother, but that is all there is to it. Yes, believe me! And then what's the good of saying the elder's in the right. Well, I must be boring you. I expect you have heard quite enough of the subject already, first one and then the other. I wish you a very good day, mademoiselle. The sort of weather we've had for the last fortnight is not going to make vegetables any cheaper."

She walked off, keeping to the middle of the street. Her demeanour was by no means that of the ordinary domestic. The possibility of any discourtesy to her, either by getting in her way or bumping into her basket was unthinkable, at all events in a civilized town that was free from disturbance.

At the Barbelenets' there was a possibility of not noticing her among the many objects, or of considering her as some piece of furniture that could be made to move merely by the sound of a voice. But here she was important in a different way. And while I watched her walking steadily away down the very middle of the rue Saint-Blaise, I thought that at that moment Madame Barbelenet must be sitting in her arm-chair, knitting her brows perhaps, so as not to forget that perpetual insidious pain she had always to combat ; and perhaps too, to be more conscious of the effort of authority the control of a household demanded.

Thus Madame Barbelenet was not entirely absent from the rue Saint-Blaise, being present in it in the dignified bearing of her servant. That street, without ceasing to be the most active and enterprising in the town, had more than anywhere become the place whence the Barbelenet family derived its sustenance, and was now therefore a kind of family street. On the right, at the first storey of a house-front, two closed shutters made a large, greenish rectangle, set somewhat awry in the white wall. I think that the merest suspicion of sleepiness on my part would have been enough to turn it into the portrait of the Judge-uncle himself, presiding over the street.

"What was the tale Marie Lemiez had told me ? That they would still be with me in two years even. But in reality, their one desire is to get married and send their scales packing. So much for my dear Marie's clairvoyance."

Both sisters evidently could not wed the single M. Pierre Febvre. But one of them would succeed, no doubt, and before very long. There would be nothing then more important for the second than to find a husband in her turn, and no doubt it would occur to her that dancing lessons were more likely to help her than continuing with the piano. The dream

of continuous prosperity, which for the last fortnight had been such a comfort, melted suddenly like smoke.

Altogether egotistically, I had seized on the first idea that struck me and now I scrutinized it, but without much conviction. I could not somehow feel disappointed. I was even anxious to stop thinking of it, in order to get to certain questions infinitely more exciting to me.

What the servant had said cast a sudden but confused light on a situation the significance of which I had still to discover.

To tell the truth, I was not even sure that M. Pierre Febvre was the fiancé in question. The servant had not mentioned his name. Yet doubtless, her allusions could only have referred to him, for there was very little probability that any other young man visited the Barbelenets. Still, stranger coincidences have occurred.

Then I confessed to myself that there must be some perversity in me to make me argue against so evident a fact. Clearly it was only some lingering pretence of discretion had made the servant pass over the name, but also, no doubt, because there could be no misunderstanding. Then, where did my pleasure in wondering about it come in?

In short, my thoughts of the previous evening had not been unfair to this M. Pierre Febvre. Yes, it was in the Barbelenets' drawing-room, between the uncle's portrait and the hammered brass flowerpot-stand that love had sprung to birth in his soul. Yes, that was where his ardent youth had seemed to seize hold on a reality equal only to the fairest dreams of adolescence. Eyes of such darkness, a pallor so living, could not augur less; nor the delicate tremor that flickered from eye to nostril.

His only difficulty would be knowing which of the sisters to choose. What a tribute to the house of Barbelenet! How better manifest that it was no casual sentiment that swayed him, no momentary infatuation, in which, what the heart says is less important than circumstances? Was it not as good as saying: "I am not an ordinary kind of suitor who meets a girl in society and whom some purely superficial impression, some fugitive accent in the voice, some smile just in the right place, some accidental coming together of lighting and a face, decides. No! my love is of so pure a nature, my love turns so

completely towards what lies deepest in the being that it loves, that it ends by finally attaining that region in which individuals lose their superficial characteristics and overflow their bounds. What I am in love with is the 'Barbelenet spirit,' I am in love with the family. As there are two girls, it is natural for me to hesitate between them, being conscious, now in one, now in the other, of some aura of that 'Barbelenet spirit' which gleams so brightly to my eyes, and promises so much, so facile an approach to the delights my soul anticipates. What a pity that bigamy happens to be illegal ! ”

I was, apart from all this, very eager for more details. I would have liked an opportunity to go back without waiting for the lesson of the morrow. Away from them, I could only make ingenious conjectures, whose chief function was to help beguile my impatience. In such matters, truth communicates itself by contact, like a smell. It is entirely hopeless to expect to find it at the end of a train of thought.

The midday meal found me in the presence of Marie Lemiez. All I had seen and heard since yesterday offered us food for endless conversation. But when I had sat down at our little table, I could find neither the feelings I generally had at that hour, nor the same pleasure in allowing my words, gestures and laughter, to issue forth as friendship dictated.

At other times, as, for instance, when I arrived first, I would look at the square table-cloth and the chair opposite me as things awaiting Marie's arrival, calling to her, and to some extent making visible to me the inward void and deprivation of satisfaction, which would have to be endured by me so long as Marie remained absent.

If it was I who came late, so soon as I got to the door, almost even before I saw Marie, my eyes would go straight to the chair tipped up for me against the table, the place which demanded me, me and none other.

Hardly a minute was necessary for the agitation of our arrival to subside, and for the slight sense of effort, needed to establish contact, to vanish utterly. It then seemed as though we had never ceased to be together ; that it was yesterday's meal that was still in progress. In that noisy dining-room the pleasure and intensity of our comradeship was very present to

us. Between the courses, which followed each other very slowly, we would talk, looking deep into each other's eyes, our elbows on the table. Our chatter, our gusts of animation and laughter, echoing from one to the other and always around us, made a sort of private tumult which gave a feeling that we were in a little world all our own, which enclosed us, but no more prevented us from sharing in the animation of the whole room than it hid us from its observation. We were present as though inside a transparent globe.

But now, on the contrary, I had the feeling that it was between Marie and myself that the boundary existed. In my mind there did not seem any vestige of hostility, but the narrow space of the table was divided by an almost tangible partition that marked off Marie's share from my own. I had a desire to say, as children do, "My plate," "My knife," "My" piece of bread. It would not have seemed amiss, if instead of being served with a common dish, we had been brought separate portions.

And entirely spontaneously, without any effort at dissimulation, I refrained from giving an account of what I had just learnt. If I had had time to think over it, I should have realized that I ought at least to have said something about the previous evening; mention my meeting with this M. Pierre Febvre, ask Marie if she knew him or had heard of him. But, from the moment we met, Marie had rather a lot to say. She told me an elaborate story of an incident that was all the topic of conversation at her school. All I had to do was make some indifferent reply, to avoid too long a silence which would make me search within myself for some means of reviving the conversation, and rob me of the excuse of having forgotten to confide to her the discovery I had made.

Still, when we had risen from the table, I could not help thinking my behaviour absurd, and far from friendly. If I had found it so amusing a few days earlier to chatter about the Barbelenets with Marie Lemiez, and go into the smallest details of an ordinary enough visit, why should I suddenly begin to be so very secretive?

But now it was almost too late to hand in that little report of mine. It would look as if I had been ruminating over the

affair, and had hesitated to confide in her, thus making it seem specially important, as though I were treating it a little as a private matter.

Simple as it would have been to say then and there, almost before sitting down : " Marie, Marie darling, listen carefully. I've news. I believe we've discovered the secret of the Barbelets," it was now extremely difficult to pretend I had only thought of it after an hour's conversation !

Marie cut short my embarrassment with an apology for leaving me. She had hardly turned on her heel before I was no longer thinking of her or racking my conscience in regard to her. What engrossed me exclusively was the thought that there was less than twenty-four hours to get through before setting out once more on the road to the station, crossing the welter of railway-lines, and penetrating afresh into the smoky dwelling so permeated by passion.

VII

I HAD scarcely rung that evening, before the door opened. I might have been a doctor summoned to an urgent case ; watched for from afar by an anxious family. The servant made curious grimaces at me, rolled her eyes and uttered half stifled sighs. The mere way in which she took my coat and hung it up implied a reminder of our earlier conversation and what she had confided in me.

For my part, I did not feel quite as much an intruder as formerly, when I entered that hall. Now for the first time, I realized clearly that it formed the ingress, and was the key to the various portions of an inhabitable dwelling. That door at the end must lead to the kitchen. Doubtless behind it went on the preparation of decent serious dishes. For the atmosphere of the Barbelenets' house though dreary, lugubrious if you like, was not by any means chill or austere. I could very well imagine Madame Barbelenet presiding at the distribution of noble cuts of roast beef ; and M. Barbelenet in his cellar, bending beside a little lamp, intent on the bottling of a cask of capital Bordeaux. The Barbelenets' house was not altogether unlike an old painting, all black at the first glance, but nevertheless rich in tarnished reds and golds.

In the drawing-room, the younger sister was alone waiting for me. She anticipated my inquiry by saying that her sister, who was rather tired, might not be able to take her lesson, and that in any case we could begin without her.

Marthe seemed embarrassed as she talked to me. I noticed that her features were less composed than usual and that her eyes avoided mine. She was in a hurry to sit down at the piano and take refuge with her secrets in the noise of scales.

But her playing betrayed her more even than her looks. The eyes, when they play a part, confess too many things at once. Their too hurried speech is no longer clear. But at

the piano, the agitation of the soul flows out, do what you will to constrain it.

A few bars were played without revealing anything out of the ordinary ; hardly even a slight precipitancy. Suddenly, though nothing in the progress of the music announced it, I heard a poignant note, a sound comparable with a sharp point which would at first rest lightly on the skin ; but then the skin gives way abruptly and the point is suddenly deep in the flesh.

Immediately there followed a series of notes of assumed tranquillity, laboriously regular, as though she intended to put me off the scent ; as if someone, after uttering a cry, had said evenly : " Well ? What's the matter ? What are you staring for ? "

I studied this symptom of disorder with rather cruel attention. Its upshot meant nothing to me. Nothing in me made any attempt to come to Marthe's rescue ; nothing encouraged her to master herself. " How long," I wondered, " is she going to hold out against the inward panic that is gradually mastering her ? " I anticipated an outburst, less from curiosity than from a sentiment of antagonism. I ranged myself, so to speak, against her, in alliance with her panic.

" How far will her resistance go ? "

Suddenly Marthe leaned forward over the piano, hollowing herself, as if she had received a blow full in the breast, and carrying her hands to her face with a swift gesture, began to sob.

I went up to her. I put my arms round her. It was not so much a heartfelt impulse on my part, as an act of propriety. I was annoyed with myself for being so cool about it, considering how easily I felt pity for suffering less acute. But just then, Marthe's condition, whatever might have caused it, seemed so inevitable, that any compassion could be no more than formal. I even believe I envied her the acquisition, so young, and without being particularly marked out for it by personal attractions, of a passionate experience for which other women often have to wait indefinitely.

As for Marthe, she clung to me, with a caressing insinuation of all her being, and received my consolations with such an ecstasy of abandonment, that it made me uncomfortable to reflect how little I deserved it.

"My sister is too cruel," she said at last, "I haven't done anything to her. It isn't me that is responsible for all that is happening."

"What is it? Have you two been quarrelling?"

"She hates me. She's just said the most awful things to me. She says she wishes she was dead, that it's my fault, and that the end will be that she'll throw herself under a train, in front of the house."

Marthe went on sobbing. I had remained near her, standing against the piano. The music book was level with my eyes. The curved page glistened. There were innumerable black notes on it, too polished looking, too ordered, too systematically arranged. The page produced in me an indefinable sense of how well ordered our modern lives are and how tedious it all is. I saw a picture of a long American street of houses built of cement, metal and tiles, the walls of which would be entirely washable. And without losing a word of what Marthe was telling me, without ceasing to lend my attention to the peculiar wriggling movements which passed over her neck and bosom, even to the extent of feeling that they were attempting to prolong themselves in my own person, and that certain latent muscles of my own were already imitating them, I resolutely went on with the casual train of my thoughts. Planing above my spirit, a sort of witness reflected on my two trains of thought, compared them and intermingled them with unaccountable enjoyment, then maliciously refused to give the preference to either.

"You know, she's quite capable of doing it, simply to revenge herself on me, and in such a way that everyone would blame me for her death."

"But what reason could she have?"

"She hates me. How can I help people finding out sooner or later that she's got a horrid character and getting disgusted with her? And is it my fault either that her features are so hard and that she has two little wrinkles already at the corners of her mouth? I would not mind buying her plenty of pots of cream, if that would help, and if what she uses isn't any good."

"Now, Marthe, you're being very wicked."

"Not the tenth part of what she says to me every day."

"But, anyhow, what is this terrible thing that has come between you?"

"Oh, it's not very complicated. You'll soon see whether or not I had anything to do with it or if I could have done anything to prevent it. You know Pierre Febvre, he's our cousin, the young man you saw the day before yesterday? Well, when he first started coming here, there was no idea of anything, either on his side or ours. He is a distant cousin on my mother's side. He had six months' leave. They sent him to F——-les-Eaux. He remembered we lived close by and paid us a visit. That was when he was first asked to dinner. A week before, my parents hadn't even thought of him. As soon as they saw him, as they already had the idea of marrying off my sister, though not of course immediately, they scented a son-in-law. Pierre hasn't got a bad job. He's a purser in the mercantile marine, on a big ship. He made a good impression on my mother, who likes 'men of the world,' as she calls them, and has never quite reconciled herself to papa's rather too humble ways. Pierre Febvre himself never dreamed of such a thing. To begin with, he's very easy-going; and then, he's not used to middle-class life in a small town, where everything one does has to be worked out beforehand. He was bored over there in his hotel, especially as he was not going in for any serious course of treatment. Here, he had the society of two girls to amuse him. And in ten minutes by train he could get to us. That's all. But you don't know my mother's capacity for making people do what they least expect. A month after Pierre's first visit it was an understood thing he was going to marry Cécile. You won't often meet anybody with such strength of character. Note that not even the slightest hint of a declaration or any formal discussion had taken place. It was a masterpiece on her part. No one was even put to the trouble of saying Yes or No."

"But surely there must have been some understanding between the two. If your sister and M. Pierre Febvre had not been drawn to each other——"

"I'll make that point clear. Cécile's disposition is much too gloomy for her to care for anyone, what I call caring. But it is

quite clear that she did have some feeling for Pierre. There was no need for my mother to convince her of it. As for Pierre, as I say, he fell into the trap. And no sooner was he aware of what had happened than he regretted it."

"Was there an actual engagement?"

"No, but it was only a question of dates in mamma's mind. For instance, according to her, the engagement was to take place before the end of Pierre's leave, and the marriage as soon as papa had retired. The next thing was that Pierre began to cool visibly towards Cécile. He paid more attention to me. I swear I never encouraged him. You know I'm incapable of doing so, anyway. And note that Pierre had always paid just as much attention to me as to Cécile, and that if it hadn't been for mother . . . Well, little by little, it got simply awful for me. Now, Cécile accuses me of having betrayed her. Every day she makes scenes with me. Just now, she was threatening to kill herself."

"And how do you reply, Marthe?"

"What can I reply? At first I told her that Pierre was perfectly free to choose for himself; and that though my mother and she were both very strong characters they were not strong enough to make affection grow where it didn't exist. Then, when I saw how frantic she was getting, I promised I would do nothing to attract Pierre to me, and that I would not put any obstacle in the way of the success of the scheme. I am quite ready to efface myself in favour of my sister, seeing that otherwise apparently the house is going to fall to bits. But even that isn't enough for them. I shall only have any peace when they are convinced Pierre does not love me any more and when I——"

She stopped suddenly and sobbed a little. I was cruel enough to suspect that Marthe was behaving thus because it seemed to her the right thing to do. It fitted the circumstances too well. I remembered my mother, a woman, in reality, of a rather harsh disposition, but who, nevertheless, could not speak even casually of her own deceased mother, without a tear dimming her eye.

"But, my dear Marthe, matters have gone so far that you ought to examine your feelings very closely. I urge you to do

so. In a matter of this kind it isn't a question of behaving like a little girl. And first of all, are you sure of your own sentiments ? ”

“ My sentiments ? ”

“ Yes, in regard to M. Pierre Febvre. . . . Is there nothing on your side of a sort of—how shall I say ?—emulation, a desire to thwart your sister and the plans of your family ? Eh ? Are you quite sure ? Do you feel a very great attachment to M. Pierre Febvre ? Have you a feeling that he counts more than anyone else in the world ? More than your parents ? That it would be impossible to live without him ? Or at least difficult, very difficult ? Is the idea that he might belong to someone else altogether abhorrent to you ? ”

Marthe looked at me uneasily. Even I was a little astonished at what I was saying. I have not much taste, as a rule, for playing the part of father-confessor and benevolent adviser, which so many find gratification in taking on. The fatuity and hypocrisy of such presumption I see clearly, but very dimly any utility it may have. I very much dislike anyone adopting that tone with me. But this time no one could have taken exception.

Marthe said at last, avoiding my eyes :

“ I feel I'm very fond of him ; I feel I love him.”

The words she used, and the tone in which she said them, seemed full of reservations and doubts. It should have been obvious to me that her reply, apart from the question of shame, was dictated solely in deference to myself. When I was at school one of the girls, if asked : “ What is the capital of Spain ? ” or “ What is the square of seven ? ” would always reply : “ Madrid ? ” or “ forty-nine ? ” with an air of gentle interrogation, as though to give the mistress to understand that even the least dubious truths were still subject to her confirmation of them.

But I was not being quite honest. It suited me to believe that the child before me had merely got an idea into her head.

“ And Monsieur Pierre Febvre ? ”

“ Monsieur Pierre Febvre ? ”

“ Yes, does it seem to you that he, on his side, has actually, definitely, made his mind up ? ”

‘ I trust him.’

“ I should probably not be asking you this question if I had the pleasure of knowing him better. But in what you have told me about him there is nothing to his discredit. All the same, one might ask whether in this matter he sees eye to eye with you. It often happens that young men seek the society of girls, and show them a good deal of friendliness without the least idea of compromising their own liberty or mode of life. It's quite possible to be mistaken in such affairs. You tell me yourself that your mother was a little too ready to suppose that M. Pierre Febvre intended to marry Cécile. It would be a pity if that misunderstanding has merely taken another form ? ”

Marthe, instead of replying, bent her head, sighed, and wiped her eyes. I thought she was going to cry. Was it to spare herself further confidences ? Was she unwilling to tell me precisely what evidence she had of M. Pierre Febvre's feelings ? Or did she find it irksome to discuss the matter with me ? Perhaps she preferred a settled grievance to the trouble of re-opening the whole question.

At this moment we saw the door open, and Cécile enter with the air of a stern pedagogue. Marthe hastily played a few notes, blinking her eyes to restrain a final tear, and holding her handkerchief crumpled in her left hand. For my own part, I pretended to be more interested in the page of music than in Cécile's arrival.

“ Did she hear us talking ? ” I wondered. “ Well, what did we say ? Even if she has been listening with her ear to the door, she can't have anything against me.”

I, of course, had not said anything really compromising. But I had the feeling that the girl would be justified in not wishing me well, both for Marthe's words as for my own. What I had just been listening to, was no longer quite extraneous to myself, was, in fact, half my own since some of it had come from me.

As Marthe, her practice over, showed no signs of leaving the piano, but was more concerned to keep an advantage made so much more possible by the position she was in, the elder girl announced drily :

"If you see no objection, Marthe, I should like to play too . . . when my turn comes."

Marthe made no reply, but got up, with the expression of a persecuted child swallowing its sobs, and rapidly went out of the room.

The thought of repeating with the elder the identical scene I had just endured with the younger, in no wise captivated me. And any desire I might have had to act the part of a father-confessor had utterly vanished. "I know already what she is going to say to me, how she is going to embroider the tale. Really, these lessons are beginning to be an ordeal."

Cécile looked after her sister with a disdainful, almost pitying expression. Then she turned towards me :

"I'm awfully sorry to be so late. I had a touch of headache. But I've just taken another cachet and we can go on with the practice."

Actually she did play very much as usual, perhaps even with less tightness and fewer blunders. She was very pale, but from her skin there glowed a sort of marble sheen, in which it was almost impossible to recognize her usually dull and lack-lustre complexion. All her face, in fact, seemed to express detachment and scorn.

I was more moved and also more embarrassed with her than I had been with Marthe. I could not manage somehow successfully to harmonize our respective attitudes, or even to grasp our relative positions, or how exactly we affected each other.

Doubtless, my presence was important to her and she was posing somewhat for my benefit. But it did not seem to me as if it would be a facile undertaking to exert any influence on her. I did not say to myself, as in the case of Marthe a few minutes earlier : "How long can she hold out ?"

Then I had a thought which upset me. I remembered the threat she had made to her sister. "It is not impossible for this false serenity to be rooted in a very real determination to kill herself. It would be better if her despair were openly advertised to the world. If what I imagine is real, I have not the right to pretend I know nothing and suspect nothing. In the absence of a frank explanation that I have not the courage to demand and that she might perhaps refuse me, my duty is

to think out two or three apparently commonplace words, which, charged full of significance and emotion, will fly straight to the hidden sources of her will to die."

I could not find them. And what was artificial in Cécile's attitude ended by involving me too. I became aware, in commenting on her exercises, that my sentences were getting complicated and that the tone in which I spoke had lost much of its directness. I felt fatigued. It is conceivable that "speechifying" may be delightful when directed at an immense auditorium. But, that day, in the Barbelenets' drawing-room, with the sombre Cécile sitting on my left, and the uncle's portrait above us, and the flickering gleams, muted and bitter, that played from the woodwork of the piano to the stand of hammered brass, "speechifying," became a possibility as depressing as pumping away in a basement.

I began to get a sense of the dead weight of the Barbelenets' house. Some real effort had to be called forth to continue to be part of it. All the earlier effort I had unconsciously called up in getting used to it now seemed to have been in vain. Yet I had got used to a great deal in that house. What was it that suddenly made everything unfamiliar and oppressive.

A few minutes before the lesson ended, Cécile said: "Would it bore you very much to meet M. Pierre Febvre here next Tuesday? He is coming to see us."

I answered:

"No, not at all," in a way that revealed how much the question surprised me. As she spoke Cécile quickly glanced at me; and then turned back to the piano. She was half smiling. Her attitude was neither sufficiently artificial nor mysterious to make me feel it hid any sarcastic or aggressive intention.

But several hours later I was still musing over it.

VIII

THAT particular party seemed at first to have nothing very remarkable about it. When I arrived, only the girls were present. I gathered that M. Pierre Febvre had lunched at the house and that at the moment he was visiting the workshops under the guidance of M. Barbelenet. As for Madame, she was no doubt resting in her room on the first floor or on a day-bed in the dining-room, behind those folding-doors through which I had not yet been admitted.

I began the lesson as usual. There was an ominous calm between the two sisters, and between them and myself. Cécile and Marthe used only a distant courtesy to each other, like the pupils in those highly respectable boarding schools, where the most intimate friends talk to each other in the most stand-offish way. Yet each behaved as if she alone had a special and secret understanding with me.

When Cécile said to Marthe : " I'm three bars beyond B," her tone implied : " Of course I must have made a mistake and it's our dear Marthe who is in the right. Even if one day I managed to play my piece to perfection, my bad luck would see to it that perfection was the wrong thing that day." But also the gleam in her eyes, the wrinkling of her brows, and something less obvious that I am unable to define, transmitted this thought to me : " What can the third bar beyond B possibly matter to anyone who has determined to end her life ? "

Yes, it was she herself reminding me of it, as in silence some confidence is renewed ; and it was all her person, at once passionately alive and impenetrably veiled, that sent this thought out to me. Yet in our conversations there had been no question of it. On the contrary, it seemed to me as if Marthe's whole attitude was alluding to my approaching meeting with Pierre Febvre, questioning me in regard to it, perplexed

somewhat and spying out some sign that would determine for her whether her attitude to me was to be trust or distrust.

At the end of one of the exercises we all heard a sort of moan that came from the dining-room. It sounded as if it might have been going on for some time, though muffled by the sound of the piano. In the circumstances this cry of distress, faint as it was, made a painful impression upon me. It imbued the smoke-coloured folding-doors with a kind of baneful solemnity and seemed to increase their size.

Marthe had immediately risen, with the expression of a little girl hastening to answer a call from her mother. She went into the dining-room, Cécile rose in her turn, but remained standing near the piano.

A moment later Marthe returned and shut the door.

"It's nothing. Mamma says Eugénie's taking an awful time to fetch her new tablets. She wants me to see about it . . . at once . . . please excuse me, mademoiselle, I must go into the kitchen and see what is happening about tea. In any case you won't get much peace for working now. Eugénie and I will be disturbing you all the time."

Madame Barbelenet did not appear until the preparations for tea had been completed. I scrutinized her face, her mouth, for some sign of the moan I had heard but could not find any. It could be seen in the majestic expression of Madame Barbelenet's face that according to her ideas, physical pain had certainly a place in human life, and that it vouchsafed the loftier sort of soul a means of expressing itself, but only in a general sort of way, without application to any particular or recent event.

It was not possible, either, to guess whether Madame Barbelenet was aware of the rivalry between her two daughters, whether she knew how grave it was or whether she was resigned to the frustration of her original plan and had turned her thoughts to other possibilities. From time to time she threw a glance at Cécile or Marthe, a glance that was detached enough not to seem inquisitorial, or at least to give the impression that her interest was confined to the details of their clothes or the arrangement of the tea-table.

M. Barbelenet and M. Pierre Febvre now arrived. The gathering was exactly as it had been on the former occasion.

But I had to make an effort to realize it. My first feeling was that somehow I myself was playing a different part in it. Which is not to say that I had now penetrated any more deeply into the Barbelenet household, or to any extent made one of the family—the mere idea of such a thing would have turned my stomach. Nevertheless, the feelings, the thoughts and influences which played their parts inside the Barbelenet circle, had their nucleus and were centred less remotely from my own being, and in their motions came quite close.

My very first glance at Pierre Febvre plunged me once more into all those meditations which, pursued by me on that earlier occasion, had been interrupted by Madame Barbelenet's eye. Now the chain of my thoughts began again, at the precise spot at which it had been broken off, like the strip of lace in a mechanical loom suddenly stopped, or a dream that goes on night after night.

"Provincial actor? Manservant? Suppose I met him to-day, say for the first time in a traincar, is there anything, anything different in his face that would prevent my thinking he might be some young valet, with a little time off, out for an airing? Yes, there is, and it doesn't take long to find it. For his eyes are not obsequious or insolent when they look at you, and they don't gleam fiercely with the pride of being above his station. His face is lined in a way that shows he is at full liberty to reveal every expression as he feels it, or as occasion demands. Now he has just laughed. His expression for a moment was quite childlike, and precisely because there was no constraint, and because there was no sort of attempt to screen that single second's gaiety. Actor? No, not an actor either. . . ."

But, unlike that earlier occasion, this time my interior monologue did not engross me to the point of distraction. Its course was, so to speak, subterranean, like a piano theme for the left hand. It supplied the counterpoint to the sentences I was saying, and to the conventional thoughts I was busily framing.

It is true there was a special reason for the change in my feeling, and that was the opportunity of talking to Pierre Febvre himself. Music was what we talked about. Pierre Febvre affirmed that he had never known how to play the piano.

He might have been sincere in the sense that he had probably never followed any regular course of study, and had only learned the notation as a matter of routine. But all the same he revealed the possession of an advanced musical culture. The manner in which he indicated certain notes on the keyboard, to remind me of passages in the works he quoted, evoked in my mind a small cabin on board ship, a group of officers smoking in a circle and Pierre Febvre sitting at the piano. A scattering of young men, secretly oppressed by the loneliness of life at sea, made uneasy by the stirring, deep down, of awakened memories, and Pierre Febvre with them; and the music through which their anguish was translated into a lofty joy.

As he talked, a sort of slight intoxication took possession of me. It was a long time since I had talked deeply with anyone, particularly in the presence of others. Marie Lemiez was not very inspiring on difficult topics, and there were only ourselves to judge what we said.

Here, our critics were not especially formidable, yet their presence considerably increased the intensity of my impressions. I thought that suddenly, through a sort of recognition and mutual understanding, he and I had somehow made, with no outside aid, something that was like an illuminated city round which the barbarian tribes hovered at a distance, astonished by rejoicings they could not understand.

Pierre Febvre may not have formulated this idea to himself, but he must have had some intimation of it. And only when it was well past the moment at which I usually left, did it occur to me that the proper thing was to take my leave. All the same I had to concentrate my will on that thought for several minutes and tell myself twenty times at least that I had to go, before I at last succeeded in rising and saying the necessary words.

Madame Barbelenet had hardly had time to say to her husband, "You must escort mademoiselle," before Pierre Febvre exclaimed:

"But I too am going back to town. If mademoiselle will allow me, I will see her over the tracks."

The proposal was made so decidedly that no one had time

to make an objection, nor even discuss the matter. Madame Barbelenet seemed on the point of reminding Pierre Febvre that he was expected to stay to dinner as usual. But she contented herself with throwing back her head, raising and slightly opening her left hand, and for a second ceasing to breathe.

As for the girls, I refrained carefully from in any way imagining what they might think.

Pierre Febvre and I found ourselves, rather abruptly, outside the front door.

The same impulse which an hour earlier had taken possession of us both and which was now responsible for so unexpected a decision on the part of Pierre Febvre, made me say to him: "I feel very guilty at dragging you away from your fiancée."

We were crossing the first of the tracks. He exclaimed, "You'll get me run over if you give me shocks like that. My fiancée . . . well——"

And he burst out into a sequence of "Ha! ha! ha!" that was extremely gay and virile. Not so intimately connected with the body as laughter, but an outburst which seemed truly the purest offspring of the joyous intellect, and which conjured up such a prospect of all the jovial attitudes that could be brought to life that I could very well imagine it echoing through a narrow ship's corridor, or at the end of a gangway, or on top of an iron ladder. A single look from some people can often seem inexhaustible, and serve to endow that person with authority of astonishing power over us. The "Ha! ha! ha!" of Pierre Febvre transmitted suddenly to me an entire confidence in myself and circumstances, a new audacity in my relation to humanity. It was like a draught of wine. One's very flesh and bones took their share of the sensation. I envied the man who was so well stocked with the possibility of such feeling, and realized how impatient I should be to hear again that "Ha! ha! ha!"

When we had crossed a few more rails, he added: "Who told you I was engaged to . . . well, to begin with, to whom?"

"Forgive me. I've said something silly, or been very much

so. I have been hearing things without paying much attention to them and misunderstanding what I heard, odds and ends of secrets my pupils let fall . . . I'm so sorry——"

"Oh, please don't be so apologetic! Now I, on the other hand, am delighted to have the opportunity of finding out a few things which, after all, do happen to concern me. Now please! You've been frank with me, which was an excellent start. Don't go and take refuge in diplomatic caution, after that."

"But I'm sure there's nothing I can tell you that you don't already know better than I do."

"Excuse me! You seem to me the very person to inform me of a great many things. Already, you have informed me that I'm engaged. Do you think that's such a trifling matter?"

There was room here for a fresh "Ha! ha! ha!" which I hoped for, but which did not come. As I was thinking what a pity it was, the thought came to me that a repetition at the moment I expected it would have turned that glorious outburst, issuing from the very core of existence, into something mechanical, and further, that its power over me lay partly in its ability to surprise me.

"Well! Let me hear the rest of the news. When is the wedding fixed for? It's very important I should know that, on account of the preparations."

"You are laughing at me, and no wonder. It doesn't concern me. But I am sure you will understand that if a mistake has been made, I can only say I am sorry for it, without being able to explain how it happened. If there is one of us," I added after a moment, "who is in a position to set the other right, it is certainly not me."

He smiled, giving his face a slight pucker of amusement which shone oddly in the light of a lamp-shaft. "Good for you. Really, I'm in the situation of a defendant. Yes, yes, and that's as it should be. . . . This is where I expiate my sins. . . . You have a perfect right to ask how it has come about that I am taken for the fiancé of . . . well, of whom? Well . . . one of the Barbelenet girls and so to speak, fiancé to the Barbelenet girls."

He uttered the phrase so genially, and it corresponded so

well with certain previous reflections of my own that I could not help laughing.

"I see I must justify myself and explain matters."

I protested.

"Yes, yes. But you must help me. It's perfectly simple. There are certain things in this affair which elude me, and which I am sure you can make clear."

We were just coming out of the station. As we were about to cross the square outside he stopped, saying in a tone of vexation :

"Look at that, I never noticed it, and here I am taking you right back into town. I don't suppose you want to be seen with a man who hasn't yet reached the canonical age. What? We're in the provinces, you know, and living alone as you do . . . I realize all that clearly, and yet once more I was just on the point of behaving like an idiot. . . . You do not say anything. You look as though you were thinking that the way I am holding forth under this arc lamp which lights us up so magnificently is even more idiotic?"

"Why no! I was no more aware of it than you were. But it's quite likely, as a matter of fact, that if the mother of one of my pupils were to meet me in your company, walking along the Avenue de la Gare, which so few people use at this time of the night, and where it's rather dark too; she wouldn't put herself out much to find the most charitable interpretation for it. I shouldn't worry, in any case. Who knows? She might be grateful to me for the chance."

He looked at me with a sparkle in his dark eyes, as one looks at an intimate friend who has just made a rather good and subtle joke.

"She might. But listen. It's most annoying. Yet I really can't let you go without an explanation. No, positively not. On the other hand we're not going to start crossing those rails again."

At this point I had a very curious sensation. It seemed very important to me, too, that our conversation should not end then and there. I say "to me too," because I thought I divined under the joking manner of Pierre Febvre the same, almost anxious desire.

I had a feeling that at all costs we must stay together for a little longer. In half an hour, for instance, our separation could take place and without any difficulty. The thing I felt was not of the sort, either, that compels one to prolong parting. But rather it recalled to me certain emotions I had experienced, when I was waiting, all concentration, for the satisfactory termination of some delicate process, in which chance and the actual matter itself had played as vital a part as my own dexterity, and in which it was important to avoid over-impatience for fear of prejudicing the result.

"Are you going towards the shops?" I asked.

"Yes, there are some things I have to buy. At this time of year three-quarters of the shops in F——-les-Eaux are shut and it's impossible to get anything."

"Then we could take this street. I know the way. It's a little longer than going down the Avenue de la Gare, but we are practically certain not to meet anybody."

We started down the street I had indicated, which was a very dark one.

"You know," he said, "that I am a sailor, in the merchant service. My last voyage I caught rather a bad type of influenza while in port in the Azores. On top of that I had anæmia and a touch of liver trouble. In short, the ship's doctor, a splendid fellow by the way, got me six months' leave. I wasn't sorry. I'd been at sea a long time. And as the company's fleet had grown a good deal, the staff was inadequate, and we had all been rather overworked. I couldn't very well spend my leave at Marseilles, that would have looked a bit too frivolous, so to save my face the doctor ordered me off here, to F——-les-Eaux. It was pure chance. I was very bored for two or three weeks and then I remembered that I had relatives in the neighbourhood. The Barbelenets are cousins on my mother's side, but I couldn't tell you whether they are two or three times removed. I must have been confoundedly hard up for something to do to remember them, with an unholy need for distraction to want to go and call on them, for middle-class society, high or low, as a rule absolutely terrifies me. You see I was brought up in it. My loathing of it dates from childhood, and that I really think is partly why I became a

sailor. I had not even got the Barbelenets' address, but I remembered that the father had a fairly important position on the railway. I ought to tell you, too, that I find it rather difficult to go for long without something like a big seaport or a large town. And there wasn't much here to suit my requirements. But a big station, with lots of buildings—the station here is very fine, don't you think ; all these sheds and tracks, eh ?—a big station, that appeals to me. I'm not at all sure it wasn't partly for the sake of the station that I came, just to have a pretext to walk round the platforms looking for cousin Barbelenet. It isn't so very different from the docks, don't you think ? Though possibly I've only just thought of that as an excuse. So I went and looked for my cousin, and found him, and his house too. Ah ! That house of his ! I was hugely delighted with it, I can tell you. In Marseilles, facing the docks, there is a kind of platform, just where the quays of several docks meet, and on it a little obscure bar which is wonderful. The landlord has a beard, and will pour you out a glass of old Manada rum at ten o'clock in the morning sitting in the sun, while you listen to the rivets being punched into the hulls of ships. Well, the Barbelenets' house is certainly not quite so cheerful as that, it's even a good deal less cheerful, but it has a character of its own too. It would probably be better if there were a little bar there for the platelayers and firemen, with an old lady—something like Madame Barbelenet a little the worse for wear—to serve out on occasion a glass of old Manada. But you have to put up with what you can get.

“ You are thinking I'm going round and round the question, and not getting to the point quickly enough, aren't you ? True. The point ? Well, I'm not so sure. What I have just been telling you looks rather as though it had been manufactured for the occasion. It gives the impression of being too innocent to be true. What ? ‘ Penetrating ’ people, when you say things like that to them treat you to a smile of . . . well, of penetration. But even they can't always be right.

“ Of course there were two girls in the house. I am not claiming that I found the circumstances disagreeable or even uninteresting. If I told you I was fond of the society of women, generally speaking, that would be true, roughly true.

My occupation may have something to do with it. At the same time our position in that respect is by no means the same as the Navy's. A liner, like the one on which I go to sea, is full of women and girls of considerable attraction. We have plenty of opportunities of being near them and talking to them. Especially the pursers. We are the people who deal with grievances, and they come to us when they want their cabins changed. In the evenings, if the work is not behind, there is nothing to prevent us going the round of the saloons and chatting with the passengers. On the contrary, it is part of our duty. And there is no risk of our being treated as intruders. You would hardly believe what immense depths of obsequiousness even a millionairess ten times over can contain. The very people who, on terra firma, would have us kicked out of their houses if we had the effrontery to present ourselves, are most exquisitely courteous on board. You see, in spite of the gilding, the splendid carpets and the luxurious arm-chairs, there is a perpetual vibration which is always calling up a crowd of little images of a distinctly sobering effect, so that their pride never really has a chance to turn into something hard.

"However, unless one is an absolute imbecile, it must be quite evident that such contacts do not take place on a basis of equality, and that there is an immense difference between that sort of thing and true intimacy and companionship. Accordingly, for my part, I don't overdo it. I much prefer smoking a cigar up in the bows with some rather dull American, who wants to know what hotel to go to in Florence, or whether the King of Italy is popular with his subjects.

"If you consider, further, that all these women are foreigners, and that their principal ambition, if they do talk to me, is to acquire a perfect accent and 'get to know phrases,' you will perceive that in one sense I get no feminine society at all.

"As for the Barbelet girls, well, what shall I say? They were nice little country maidens, and then also they were my relatives. There was no need to stand on ceremony with them. So from the very start I took a familiar tone with them, without troubling to find out whether that was what they were used to. The elder daughter lacks charm and is not particularly endowed with good-looks. Even already there's a thick

crust of the various prejudices of her family and class upon her. But she's got plenty of spirit, I give you my word. Sometimes I felt tempted to say provoking things to her, merely to see the flash in her eyes, though she instantly conceals it, which gives some indication of the audacity and even ferocity of her soul. I can perfectly well imagine her living in the sixteenth century, given up to an existence of passionate intrigue. Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! Difference of sex makes for clear-sightedness, what ? You notice I said the sixteenth century. I didn't bring in either Madame de Pompadour or the Dubarry. The younger sister is a much more attractive little girl, but not perhaps such a solid character. All the same, one's grateful to her for being just like all other girls at her age, though she does live in a house that has deucedly little resemblance to any other house. Can't you see, a mile off, the seventeen pages of exclamatory phrases and antitheses it would inspire in some writer of the romantic school ? Eh ? First a description of the Barbelenets' house fit to make your teeth chatter, and then of Madame Barbelenet peering into a witch's cauldron :—' Within that gloom a star glimmered, within that cavern breathed a flower.' You must admit yourself there's something of that in it.

" So I can't deny, therefore, that it was a pleasure to associate with these girls. The amusement of an idle hour, for lack of something better to do, as much as you like. I kept up my visits, I made no objection to stopping to dinner ; and as I'm in the confessional, I mustn't leave out anything. Have you ever had a meal at the Barbelenets' ? No ? Well, dinners in the Barbelenet family have something compelling, imposing, they are full of a sort of sombre poetry. Dishes appear on their table which look as if they had been over-done through being forgotten in the oven, accompanied by blackish sauces, which make one determine to leave them severely alone. The maid who brings them in inspires one with no confidence at all. She seems about on a par with the floor-polishing and furniture-dusting kind, not in the least like a cook, whose shining plumpness and calm gestures are quite foreign to her. True, but wait. The first mouthful perplexes you ; you begin to wonder whether you're not well on the way to taking

a perverse pleasure in having your palate, as it were, outraged. But the doubt passes quickly. A single glass of the wine old Barbelenet pours out for you settles that question. You discover at once that you are beginning a repast of the very first quality and that you will have to be on the alert. It's not simply a matter of exquisite cooking; it's something better than that; profoundly significant cooking. You see nothing but the most ordinary dishes: the family leg of mutton, the family chicken. But in each case you tell yourself: 'I never ate leg of mutton before,' or else, 'I'd no idea what a chicken could be until now.'

"Then there seems to spread before you, over all the details of the place in which you find yourself and the people of the house, a sort of illumination that must be called gastronomic. You note that the servant when she sets the dish down in the centre of the table, envelops, embraces it with a last lingering meticulous and maternal look of devotion. You note that Madame Barbelenet has an emergency stock of patent medicines beside her plate, but that the plate itself contains a thick round of meat cut from the very middle of the joint, and that her glass contains a cool two fingers and more of old Burgundy. Cécile does not drop that rather morose expression of hers, and Marthe retains that look as of a child whose thoughts are elsewhere. But you hear Cécile remark in a dry undertone, without turning her head, and merely twitching the side of her mouth nearest her father, that the wine just opened is corked; and you hadn't even guessed it. You see Marthe seize on the pepper or mustard, and measure out careful doses on her slice of sirloin. Ah! I can tell you, I, who sometimes have had as neighbours on board ship the daughter of a millionaire or an ambassador's wife, that the Barbelenet girls have deeply impressed me. It wouldn't be with them I should dare to pour out, with lavish gestures, one of our excellent chemical Haut-Saint-Emilion's, or point my fork at a superb cut of cold-storage beef. You'll think that love came to me, as appetite does to some, while I was at table. For it really still looks as though I'm shirking the main issue, which is the excuse for this long conversation that has brought us through all these streets. Well, yes. With you I can be frank without seeming

to act the cynic. You know, I'm not one of those who think that for a man and a woman to fall in love, all sorts of luckily contrived meetings and unusual affinities have to operate. Not at all. My idea is that no sooner do a man and woman meet than the first thing that passes between them is a sentiment of love. And I use that word in all seriousness. I don't mean an impulse of a purely physical or primitive nature. No, love ! An exchange of feelings which is at once of considerable complexity. And time has nothing to do with it. What I mean is, that from the first second of the encounter the phenomenon has actually occurred. Time, on the other hand, may upset the whole thing. For instance, when I land after a long voyage, I am particularly sensitive to my environment. Marseilles seems as prickly as a briar-bush. Every wheel that rolls over the paving-stones is a separate noise in my ears. Well ! When I am in the street, I see innumerable men and women passing close to one another, overtaking one another, their directions clashing or approximating. There are thousands of mutual contacts and momentary proximities taking place, thousands of amorous sentiments, each flashing for a brief moment between a man and a woman. The street into which I have just disembarked seems to me one prodigious crackling of sparks. The next day I am acclimatized again, by which I mean that I no longer observe things of that nature, and I go about my business as blind as anybody else.

" So, in my opinion, a man and a woman who meet spend that first moment in love. But, except for the rarest cases, it cannot last. Either the distance separating them becomes suddenly vast or they absent themselves from each other with frightful rapidity. That woman is already somewhere else. I was thinking of something else, there was only just time to love her, though not enough to look at her or even time to want to turn my head in the direction in which she goes from me. Or else other feelings invade my mind, registering their protests. Thoughts of prudence, of the conventions, of anything you like, which soon completely restore things as they were. You may think I am exaggerating. Well, perhaps it is actually truer for men than women. Or rather, men acknowledge it, whereas women. . . . Anyhow, you see that, believing in

such a theory, I can dispense with hypocrisy. I am not disputing, therefore, that between these girls and myself, especially at the beginning of our relation, something resembling a feeling of love came into being. The contrary case is what would require explanation. I say, between the girls and myself ; it was no more a question of Marthe than of Cécile ; and in itself, the event was of no importance, no practical importance. It was not destined to have any particular sequel. I have told you I am sometimes very sensitive as to what is happening round me. That is true, but there's no sort of regularity about it. I have the most deplorable fits of absent-mindedness. It does not even occur to me to notice things that stare one in the face. If I ever get married it might be disastrous. Ha ! Ha ! So, it was only quite recently that I perceived I was entangled up to the eyes in the family toils. I made the discovery that the elder daughter, Cécile, had determined she was going to marry me, and that Madame Barbelenet's glances brooded over me in a way that would have incubated any number of prospective sons-in-law. My first thought was to take the train to Marseilles and ask one of my colleagues to let me substitute him on the next boat. I really don't know why I didn't. The difficulty of making up one's mind ? Regret at giving up some months of my leave ? My cousin's excellent table ? No, in spite of them. You'll no doubt think, the love I did not realize ! No, positively, not that either. Much more, the difficulty of clearing off without seeming a boor ; the notion that the girls' parents might perhaps suspect some appalling intrigue and regard me in the light of a cowardly seducer taking to his heels after bringing dishonour on the family. One never knows. And all the more likely since Cécile would be quite capable, after my departure, I don't say of confessing with sobs to an imaginary downfall—she's not such a devil as that !—but of giving them to understand that matters had gone very far indeed. So by staying a few weeks longer I was warding off that particular danger and giving myself time enough to make both parties realize their error.

“ I might, from that moment, have adopted an extremely cold attitude towards the two girls. But I did not do so. Such a change in my behaviour would have made me seem like a

gentleman who, rather late in the day, discovers he has exceeded all bounds of convention, and tries to avoid consequences he had not previously taken into account. No, I behaved in my usual manner. But in order to make clear to the elder daughter that she was quite wrong in imagining herself the 'object of my desires,' and in order to make them all understand that what I had appreciated and sought for in both sisters alike was simply the charm of youth and nothing more. I set to work to display, not so much a preference for the younger sister, but a freedom in our relation, greater than existed with her sister. I proceeded somewhat as though I considered the elder girl to be growing more mature day by day, visibly turning into a woman and constantly requiring fresh adjustments in my attentions to her, yet all the time losing her most obvious attraction in my eyes. Again, I made more play with the word 'cousins,' in the plural, uttering it as frequently as I could: 'cousins.' You see? It has a sort of collective significance, circumstantially familiar. For two pins I would have tapped the maid on the cheek and kissed Madame Barbelenet herself. But I am not sufficiently sure of myself to be able to take risks as serious as those. Well! It seems to me that those tactics did not succeed particularly well. You know, in everything, the best work demands people who can appreciate it. I fear my subtleties weren't even seen—or worse still——"

"That was no doubt the reason you were so insistent, just now, to leave with me and escort me . . . so . . . publicly?"

"Pardon?"

"Exactly . . . to emphasize your attitude."

"Now that's punishing me with a vengeance. You put me in a difficult position. I could answer you . . . or rather, I might have replied indignantly and from . . . the heart. Yes, indeed. But what I said to you just now about those theories of mine makes it very awkward for me. I feel a fool. I'm sorry, sorrier than I can tell you. What? You'll excuse me, won't you, if I don't go more closely or explicitly into it."

"Of course I'll excuse you."

I made that reply after an interval of silence, during which my head was bent, my eyes fixed on the glimmering earth that

stretched in front of us, but my voice was husky with something like a tremor in it, as if the wretched words were overwhelmingly solemn and mysteriously ominous.

Was he aware of it? Did he share in my constraint? In any case, he gave the conversation one of those sudden filips that make it possible to breathe more freely again.

"You've listened very patiently to me. That was awfully good of you, but I'm not quite satisfied. You promised to help me. Yes! yes! Now you are in possession, on the one hand of my own confidences, and on the other of those of the girls; at any rate, more or less. So much is clear. There's no one, then, so well qualified as yourself to give an opinion. I shall now ask you certain questions. All you need do is provide the answers. You said just now: 'your fiancée'. Of which of the two sisters were you thinking?"

"Well . . . chiefly of the elder."

"Ah, chiefly. . . . I see! . . . And did you get that idea from her?"

"Not exactly. In any case I was talking rather at random. I must have misinterpreted things that were only said casually. The word 'engaged' or 'engagement' stuck in my mind. I certainly did not invent it. But it is possible I misunderstood the connection in which it was being used. Whichever way it was, I am a fool to have repeated it."

"H'm. I see, you're unwilling to give the young things away. That's very praiseworthy. All the same, in being helpful to me, you will be helping them too. If they are all deluding themselves about me, I really ought to know about it. Otherwise there'll be no end to it."

"Well then, to speak frankly, I believe your policy has overshot its mark. In trying to undeceive the elder you've, how shall I put it?—"

"Deceived the younger?"

"That's putting it rather strongly. You've transferred the elder's complaint to the younger."

"Ah! The deuce I have!"

"And it's even more serious than that. For the elder isn't cured. It's only the hopes, the illusions, that have changed quarters. Cécile, so far as I can see, hasn't the least idea

that she's been going on nothing at all. She accuses her sister of betraying her, and you of . . . inconstancy."

"And you don't call that a frightful state of affairs! It's a regular old salt's tale. You know the kind of thing! You land somewhere, quite by chance. You enter into communication with the natives. They are friendly. Shoulders of mutton and glass beads change hands. But you don't know their customs. You scratch your ear with your little finger and that action has a dreadful and magical significance in those parts. You're done for! You see, I belong to the provincial middle-classes. But that was a long time ago. I've forgotten nearly everything about it. But when I did live that life I was at an age when a boy could tease his cousins without getting into trouble for it. Still, what would you do in my place?"

"I think I should ask myself, first, whether I were quite sure I did not love one or other of my cousins."

"Oho! I see what you're up to. Psychology's a wonderful thing. 'You, my dear sir, imagine that you have nothing but the most indifferent sentiments in regard to the said Cécile Barbelenet. And some days even, you get pretty near to thinking that her face is nothing to write home about. Tricks of the subconscious. In reality, you're dying of love for her, no doubt of it, my dear sir.' I'd give a good deal for that to be really true. For these odd theories rather appeal to me, you know."

"Then I should go on to ask myself whether I were still perfectly free to make a choice . . . that is, whether I hadn't led one or other of the girls to feel she had certain rights over me."

"Certain rights? But that's awful. It's as though cold water were running down my back. Is that really what you think? You! You must think I'm a regular brute, or else that the old salt is very far indeed from understanding the habits of the natives. You can't imagine, though, how it bothers me for you to think that."

"But . . . I don't think anything . . . at least I don't pass judgment on anything. All I did was to raise the question."

"That's true, and I should have answered it without all these shifts. But the mere question freezes my blood. If I thought it merely silly I could ignore it. But no, I see well

enough that it's sensible. What terrifies me is the idea that my conscience itself might betray me into the hands of the natives. What? I scratch my ear with my little finger. It's bad enough already if that simple gesture sends the whole tribe up in arms. But if I begin to think that by scratching my ear with my little finger I have transgressed the taboos and incurred the penalties, well then"

I listened, laughing.

"And then again, mademoiselle, I was flattering myself that you would be on my side in this affair. . . . and that would have been particularly efficacious in helping my conscience to stand the shock. But then your question. . . . Now you know, I ought to get the opinion of an expert, I really ought; some man who could say to me, with infallible authority: 'Given the local customs, and so on, your situation is now such and such, which must entail the following consequences. Here is a list of precedents.' Then I should perhaps get back some of my confidence. But on my own authority I dare not take the chance. I am certainly under the impression that I neither did nor said anything of the slightest importance, or which could imply even the slightest commitment. But it's only my common sense that says so, that common sense which is ignorant of local customs and takes a rather lofty view of native populations. And mankind is so prone to superstition. Nothing is so catching as these ideas of magic."

"It was wrong of me to upset you so unnecessarily. In any case, it's only right you should know how your cousins feel in the matter. Perhaps there is still time to bring them both round to a reasonable attitude. But in what way I've no idea."

We had, without noticing it, made more than one detour to enable us to continue our conversation. But the town's resources, in that respect, were not inexhaustible. There was a certain collusion even, in not noticing that we had twice passed the window of an obscure little grocer's shop, in which a perfectly globular lamp lit up a number of bottles so ingeniously that I am sure it was responsible for the poignant and delicious memory of early childhood, and toy mangers and Christmas, which welled up in me.

Suddenly we found we had struck the rue Saint-Blaise, at

its junction with the rue de l'Huile. We had reached it by way of the narrow street called *Devant-la-Boucherie*, which I had not recognized, and the gloom we now emerged from made the rue Saint-Blaise appear almost dazzling.

There we were, caught in the very centre of the town before we had even begun to think of parting. Stupidly enough, we stopped in the middle of the crossing, both casting about for some manner of leave-taking that would not seem too suspicious to others or ourselves.

We were just at the point where our mutual embarrassment was confessed in the half-laughing manner in which we were looking at each other, when suddenly we caught sight of Cécile Barbelenet within a few paces. Positively she, Cécile, the elder of the daughters of that smoke-laden house. Cécile, the dark, the sombre one. She seemed to emerge, not from the busy street, but from our brains. And in the street, as there in the distant house, she was a sort of hungry emptiness into which all light and animation faded suddenly, a sort of chasm in the street.

She bowed and passed on. I had no time to see her expression, or rather I made no effort to do so. Nor did I try to see which way she went.

We walked on a few yards. Pierre Febvre had half opened his mouth, as artlessly as a little boy caught at fault. But the way he raised his brows, and the screwing up and twinkling of his eyes showed in the most delightful way that he appreciated to the full the strangeness of our encounter, and that there would be more amusement for him in discovering the reason for it than annoyance in having incurred it.

It was a long moment before we found anything to say ; but it was obvious we were thinking hard. I for my part was under the sway of peculiarly mingled feelings, some sobering and some enchanting. Better than anyone I realized all that was regrettable in the meeting. I was entirely ready to anticipate its consequences, even exaggerate them. But my emotion had no resemblance to depression.

Finally, Pierre Febvre, having glanced at the plate that gave the name of the street, said : " The Encounter in the rue Saint-Blaise, or the Fatality of Precautions," and added :

"You'll admit that it's fairly unexpected and even unnatural. Have you ever happened to meet her before at this hour, and in these parts?"

"No."

"It's at least seven o'clock. The Barbelenet misses are not the sort of persons to be sent into town on errands at this time of evening. There is food for reflection there. Meanwhile, I must say that for someone in the know, I'm a first-rate hand at getting caught. How furious you must be with me!"

He stopped, thought for a moment; all kinds of little smiles seemed to ripple over his features, as though their source was in his eyes.

"Tell me. Since I've made such a good beginning at compromising you, as they call it, perhaps the best thing to do would be to go on. A mistake is often no more than a truth plucked in the bud. . . . Would you care to have dinner with me at a little table in the most central restaurant in the town?"

"Are you joking?"

"Not a bit of it, I assure you! I know quite well what I am saying—to do a thing once is not to make a habit of it—and what I'm doing too."

"Well . . . no."

"No?"

"No. That has to be thought over too."

"You want to think it over before accepting?"

"No. I mean that such a suggestion merits most consideration on the part of the person who makes it. You are fond, I see, of the companionship of young women. It is a pity they can't take such things as lightly as you."

"Lightly! Pardon me! Think what you like of my behaviour at the Barbelenets. I plead guilty. But now at this moment I swear I am as deeply serious as it is possible to be. You may say that the difference is not so very obvious. But you know, on board ship 'Fire in the hold' is said practically in the same tone of voice as 'The first-class passengers are complaining about the fish.' So you see it wouldn't be taking things lightly, it would be——"

"Good-bye, Monsieur Pierre Febvre. It was very good of you to come so far."

IX

BACK at the hotel, I found Marie Lemiez, who had got in two or three minutes before me. It was a great pleasure. Merely to sit at the same table with her seemed enough to restore me to a feeling of security and balance.

But before I finished my soup there had been time for a sort of overwhelming sensation to take possession of me, the most remarkable feature of which was its almost entire incongruity with the preceding emotions of the day or the presence of Marie. With its very advent I sensed how importantly it bore on my situation. I would have been glad to have found clear words for it in my mind, the better to get an idea what it meant, prevent its vanishing. But though I sensed the lofty thoughts that seemed to follow in its wake though it seemed equivalent to some profound discourse on the significance of life, its actuality was infinitely remote from articulate speech, like that day-dreaming when it is enough to picture again a walk through woods, a winding road, some tint of sky too poignant to have a name.

Yet nothing could less resemble a flow of unsubstantial images. Each moment of my absorption forced itself upon me, I lived it with a sort of brutal energy. First came one scene from my daily life, then another ; I saw my actual presence, here, there ; and each time the fused elements presented themselves with startling clearness ; details " impossible to invent," gleaming suddenly forth like proof ; and particularly, bearing always on my thoughts. Each of these pictures was also a constriction, between a handclasp and a heartbeat. Far from being painful, each of these rapid pulsations was, on the other hand, pleasurable. Yet I seemed lavishly to be expending myself, to feel that I could not for long endure this sort of strain.

If, setting aside the strange quality of my phantasy, I seek

only its inner significance, it is as though I was comparing, with precipitous haste, only such events in my life as were associated with other human beings ; the confronting or mingling of my own personality with the personality of others, as well as perceiving vividly that these contacts had resulted for me, not in varied aspects of one existence, but in many existences precariously related ; the perception of various incompatible fashions of responding to happiness or duty. It also seemed very clear to me that were I to act more responsibly than a beast or weathercock, I should need the capacity to bear perpetually in mind all this vortex of separate thoughts ; or at least have perpetually in mind all its general significances.

Marie Lemiez's first words impinged somewhere near my absorption, without making any definite impression, yet causing it gradually to retreat. I felt it slipping away, disappearing from sight and plunging like wind-driven smoke into the shadowy recesses of my being, from which, perhaps, never to return.

From that moment I lent every attention, both to the presence of Marie Lemiez and to the crowding recollections of my afternoon. I seemed compelled even to reconcile these memories with her presence.

Of course, there was no question of taking Marie completely into my confidence. But it was no longer possible to leave her in complete ignorance.

How should I proceed ? How sufficiently control myself to give my news the precise appropriate colouring ? Marie, I know, is not particularly suspicious nor over-shrewd. But it is very difficult for me not to credit her with my own clear-sightedness. If my approach is not absolutely right, I shall be discovering some condemnation in her expression, of which she herself will be entirely unconscious ; I shall see my own embarrassment immensely exaggerated.

Fluctuating uncertainly between timidity and rashness, suddenly I took advantage of an access of courage to say boldly : " I say, Marie, why did you never talk to me about a certain Monsieur Pierre Febvre, who seems to be a pretty regular visitor at the Barbelenets ? You must have met him, some time or other. I've met him before there ; but to-day I got to know

him very much better. We talked a good deal. Then as he was coming back to town at the same time as myself he came part of the way with me. He seemed to me to be quite fond of the family. A cousin of some sort, I think. But he does not appear at all to belong to the same world. That doesn't prevent him being a very odd member of our much discussed Barbelenets, and I should very much like to know what you think of him, and how he seems to you, and what part you think he plays in the picture. Really, you know, that's something we've never taken into consideration. It makes quite a gap in our otherwise very conscientious study of the family. It's very regrettable, don't you think? It makes me wonder whether we shan't have to start our great research all over again. I'm surprised that you, a scientist, could have ignored such a phenomenon—unless, of course, it has escaped your attention altogether. Eh? But in science there is nothing negligible. Well, what have you got to say about it, Marie darling?"

I had become extremely voluble. I felt enough ribald chatter of a superficial and utterly hypocritical nature accumulating in me in quantities sufficient to keep me going for an hour.

Marie answered with calmness :

" Ah yes, I remember Monsieur Febvre, to be sure. I was introduced to him. I even dined once with him."

" With him ? "

" Yes, at their house."

" Did he make love to you ? "

" Why should he? No, he didn't make love to me. I remember he talked a good deal. In fact, far too much. Madame Barbelenet had started paying me compliments in her old-fashioned way, to the effect that I was a real scientist, and conducted the most marvellous experiments for my pupils, and that not even an engineer could get the better of me in a calculation, and that until she had met me, nothing in the world could have convinced her that a woman so learned could exist. Taking that as a starting point, M. Febvre plunged into various problems arising out of applied mathematics, but he did more than allude to them, each thought calling up another. He began recalling branches of study for which he had once had a

passion. He went on to say what bad luck it was, after doing two years of advanced studies and going through the whole of the Polytechnic syllabus and passing I don't know how many examinations, to end up as a sort of hotel manager—he seems to be in the administration, the revictualling department, I believe, of one of the big liners. He seemed to have quite forgotten that the Barbelenets were present, or rather for what they stood, for at time she seemed to be asking their opinion, and it was funny to hear him in front of those worthy folk lamenting the time when he thought he had discovered a general formula for determining the viscosity of gases. You really should have seen him waving his dessert knife by the blade, and gazing earnestly at old Barbelenet, as if the old man were suddenly going to let fly some crushing objection."

"But wasn't that a subtle way of making love to you?"

"As you like; but I think not. My being there simply set going a whole series of notions that he had lost sight of long ago and was pleased to get back again. So he said it all out loud."

"By the same token he couldn't altogether have been displeased at the opportunity to astonish the Barbelenets a little? Especially those young misses."

"No, that was not my impression. You know it's rather strange. It was just as though he was behaving exactly like one of those intolerable creatures who play to the gallery, and yet, deep down, it was just the opposite. I'm afraid you'll think I'm not making myself very clear. But you know, I——"

"No, no, of course I understand. And did you come across him afterwards?"

"Yes, two or three times, I think, but only going or coming."

"You never told me about him."

"Oh, well, that dinner must have taken place long before you knew the Barbelenets. And I confess I've never given it as much thought as I have to-day. . . . But why? Is there anything particularly important about the gentleman?"

"No, not at all. But since he's the only young man, apparently, who frequents the house, it seems natural to wonder if the family hasn't any designs on him."

"Yes, that's true. I remember I thought so at the time."

"You didn't notice anything particular between him and the girls?"

"Nothing very special. He treated them familiarly, like cousins in fact. And anyhow, if there had been anything in the air, I should have known it. In spite of what old Barbelenet's remarks may have led you to think the other day, I know what's going on. Every other minute Madame Barbelenet comes running to me for advice, and on far less serious matters. You saw for yourself in regard to the piano lessons. Her daughters too. Old Barbelenet doesn't count. He'll take you into corners to complain about the modern way his daughters are being educated, and sometimes even looks rather doubtfully at me. But he doesn't count if any decision is to be made. Still, I shouldn't be at all surprised if he, personally, hadn't thought of a marriage in that quarter. That would be very like him. He already sees himself the unlucky father of two old-maidish blue-stockings, and rather than such a misfortune should happen he would marry them off to a platelayer. But if it came to the point, he couldn't do anything. For that's not the type of son-in-law Madame Barbelenet wants. No. One of the company's engineers would be nearer the mark, spectacled, passed out of the Polytechnic 'first on the list'—so to speak; all those I ever hear them mention have passed in and out 'first on the list'—and had comfortable incomes of their own."

"Ah . . . So anyhow, you think that if they had any plans over there on the subject of this Monsieur Pierre Febvre, you would know about them."

"Certainly I should."

I managed to make my evening with Marie drag out fairly late, although she had given me to understand she had some work to do. It was not that I was afraid of finding myself alone. But there was no doubt that then I should be face to face again with the thoughts and emotions of the day, which seemed already massed and awaiting me. Yet, impatient as I was to fling myself recklessly into their tumult, and with every

assurance of their most precious stimulation, I could not somehow feel sufficiently prepared for so solemn a ritual. It was eleven o'clock when I re-entered my room. There is certainly very little resemblance between the end of one day and another. If I had the courage to evoke all the experience I already have of life, my pleasure would be to compare, in a sort of day-dream that would unroll like a frieze, the various ruses employed by the soul for laying aside the burden of its days. It might be a way towards happiness. At least, I think some consolation would come from it. But I am not old enough for that yet.

That evening my narrow room was to me a sort of magical enclosure. I realized it was no good counting any more on the sort of leisurely investigation of thoughts and feelings I had anticipated. No, I could not, one by one, go over the events of the afternoon, the details of the conversation at the Barbeletnets', each person's attitude, and the unexpectedness of Pierre Febvre, or our long walk through the dark streets, the things he had said, my own demeanour, and finally our meeting with Cécile . . . it all, no doubt, had a certain importance and would some day have to be investigated, but not to-night. Or, at any rate, such thoughts for the moment seemed definitely unsympathetic.

I let down my hair and the comb fell with a faint sound on the marble toilet table. I saw suddenly a church bordering on a wide, cold, suburban road with trams and overhead wires and lorries, swept by gusts of wind ; and a woman who passes down the street and seeing the church in front of her, goes into it. The woman is utterly wretched and she goes into the church as much to be alone with her misery . . . as to forget it.

My eyes caught the comb and were intrigued by its curves and reflected lights, and the marble gleaming under it. It seemed such a pity not to be a child again. Then I know what the comb would have become : a sleigh far in the north, a sleigh waiting in the midst of some vast steppe, the snow glittering monotonously under the veiled sun. Perhaps, because wolves had been heard howling or because one of the horses had died of cold.

But in bed I had no desire to sleep nor any fear of

wakefulness. The lack of resistance all through me, my extreme pleasure in merely existing, made me marvel. But there are other moments when you can only drag through time, at the tail of some significant train of thought ; these have to be dealt with gently, so deep is our fear they may desert us. But that evening I had no need at all for my thoughts. My bed buoyed me up in an entirely new sort of way, not so much with a feeling of repose as with the serenity communicated by lofty silent places. Words like "untarnished whiteness of peaks," rose instinctively within me.

Gradually a curious idea crystallized in me ; it gave me much pleasure and, at that moment, seemed as definite as anything could be. But now if I want to put it into words, it is practically impossible, even though I still experience the emotion connected with it. It was something like this, but infinitely richer and quite differently convincing. My thought was that in our ordinary life, our bodies are led to return regularly towards certain objects and places, and to find them always as they were, in the same places and positions. Bed and window remain exactly where they were, separated one from another in the same aspects and same inter-relations. My body also, always comes back to the old situation, and at last stretches itself out upon the unmoving bed. But these very places, these objects, and this body, though situated in that space which may be called visible, and though in that position they are static, somehow give me the impression of having been all the time in some other order of space invisible to us, and to have traversed vast distances, and described strange orbits, which have modified their relation to each other, so that the resulting changes are at times painful to endure, and at others pleasant. So much so even, that these familiar objects and myself are never twice in the same relation to each other ; so much so that never twice has the air wrapped me round in the same manner, with the result that my body, like a house removed by magic in the night from some hill-top to the valley, with its north turned south, is bewildered to find itself, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes miserably, exposed.

So that, although I am not at the root of the mystery, sometimes I manage to glimpse the magic working, to catch it in

the act, almost under my eyes. I remember nights in this same bed when it seemed to be deep in some pit, dreadfully deep, and the peak above me to be reaching always unattainably higher, as if the earth were opening gradually under the weight of my body, and the candlestick on the bed-table were moving very far, to a place I could not reach while my ceiling receded always, like the sky, into the infinite.

I was still far from sleep when a clock began to strike midnight. I must have heard that clock strike often before but without paying any attention to it, or asking myself where it could be. The sounds came to me from a distance, perhaps from some small church or convent chapel.

While it was striking another church chimed in. I heard them both with the utmost distinctness. But neither was loud enough to have waked anyone or even to interfere with my thoughts. Nothing could have been more discreet than this tolling of the hour, nothing more confidential than these voices, public though they were.

I suddenly felt an intense sensation of expectancy. I knew, doubtless because unconsciously I had heard them before, that the two clocks would repeat the hour. My body seemed gathering itself together, or rather a slow deliberate pressure seemed being exerted over all my body. My lips, slightly parted, were trembling a little, and my breath issued quickly and with difficulty. My breast, below my throat, was specially sensitized, as if the fragile barricades of my life itself were there. Within, my heart pounded rapidly against it; without, was the menace of the twelve strokes of each clock, immaterial but overwhelming.

Suddenly, the first of the clocks began its repetition of the hour. The other, catching up, began tolling forth almost immediately. The two sounds alternated, hardly distinguishable from each other. But their capacity to penetrate was increased by it, as if my body lay defenceless under their alliance. The one stroke pierced a wound, which that which followed held from closing. And my heart's own violent beat went out to meet them. As though the triple pulsation

yearned to blend, entwine in rapture over the debris of my body.

"No more!" I almost cried aloud. "Another stroke, that stroke again, and I shall be no more!" And that astonishing cry would have relieved me had shame not stopped it on my lips. I dared not call the silence of the room to witness the mystery that was being accomplished in my body, a mystery hardly real, so long as words had not named it. Oh, I longed to have the simplicity of saints and prophetesses, the cries that spoke their passion, their fearlessness in using words. But we do not any longer know how to appease our tortures in that way; a false shame holds us back for ever. In that room, Marie's deliberating eyes were present still. And the air about was thronged with watchful apparitions. My pupils' mothers still looked at me obliquely, though how and why I did not know. Control yourself, Lucienne: trembling Lucienne, be calm. Where do you think you are? Was not that last stroke the end?

X

By ten next morning I had hardly finished dressing. Somehow I could not reproach myself for this unaccustomed lateness, yet deliberately I would not attribute any special significance to it.

There was a lesson in town between eleven and twelve. I had time and to spare to get there. I knew I should be punctual as usual. But what is certain is that I was unconcerned about it.

The sun pouring brightly into my room prevented any feeling of discomfort from the morning chill. The marble-topped dressing-table glittered with just that sparkle we call bold in human eyes. When I touched it, the cold evoked spring and an early walk in bare woods, and then, by some extraordinary jump, a feeling as of a vast succession of years flying before me, an interminable perspective of possible activities, trembling like the poplars lining a highway.

All round me were scattered the articles I had used in dressing. And to be honest, my room, even at this late hour, was in a state of disorder which the bright sunlight only too clearly revealed. It did not bother me as much as it might have done. I thought how a rich young woman would wander from room to room of her luxurious flat, interminably getting ready to go out, wilfully scattering round her the disorder that hands less delicate than her own would set right. It occurred to me that for a girl with no fortune, my occupation was not so bad a choice, since it permitted me to imitate, on occasion, the idle careless habits of the rich.

But then I heard someone knock upon my door. I thought it was a letter, but when I opened the door, there was M. Barbelenet standing before me.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, it's very rude of me . . . most unseemly to disturb you at this hour. But I thought I should be more likely to find you in."

I offered him a chair.

"No, no ; I shall only stay a minute. It's merely about this umbrella, which must be yours, I think . . . you must have forgotten it last night. . . . I thought perhaps you might need it, the weather is so uncertain. I might have sent it back by the maid, but to-day she is turning out the place, and couldn't have come till late. As for me, it was no trouble at all to run over here."

I looked at the umbrella. It was indeed mine. I could not remember having left it the day before, nor remember even having taken it with me.

"Thank you, monsieur. But you ought not to have taken so much trouble."

"Oh, don't mention it, don't mention it."

He stood in the middle of the room, looking so sheepish, so obviously desirous to stay, and so worried by what he had still to say, that I was sorry for him.

"But, please, do sit down, Monsieur Barbelenet. It's a long way here from the station, and uphill too. You must really rest a moment."

As he sat down, I rapidly ran through the three or four possible reasons for his visit, to choose immediately what was most unpleasant. "The Barbelenets, shocked by the manner of my departure, and scandalized by Cécile's account of her meeting with us, want me to know I'm discharged, and to make it less painful, send old Barbelenet to break it gently."

A spasm of distress took hold of me. I glanced round my room, at the various articles scattered round in it. "How right you were, poor Lucienne, to take advantage of this morning's sunshine and play at being rich for a second. Five minutes more, and it would have been too late. Will you still remember how to do without ? And that shudder like a sacred garment which clothed you from morn to night. And that perpetual melody in your brain as if your soul were leaving you, to become the vault surrounding you and the music in a church. Can you remember, can you recall ? And those tears when the day ended, are they all shed ?"

But, at that moment, M. Barbelenet said :

"Yes, indeed, taking it the shortest way, the hill is pretty

steep . . ." and went on : " For my age I'm still pretty solid, and my health takes care of itself. But it's different when you have something on your mind. No. I must look pretty tired to-day. I've been through an extraordinary night ; yes, indeed, I can tell you, mademoiselle."

" Is Madame Barbelenet worse, then ? "

" No, thank God ! By the way, no one knows I've come to see you. You won't mention it, will you ? It would be better not to. Just think ! Yesterday, very late at night, I had to go round and inspect the workshops. There was a night-shift on an urgent job. When I got back—some time after midnight—but you've never been upstairs, have you, at our house ? Well, the girls each have their room at the head of the stairs, while ours is at the end of the passage. They should have been asleep for hours. Well, as I passed Marthe's door I heard someone talking in great excitement, shrieks even, and sobbing. I guessed what might be the matter, but I should never have imagined how serious it could be. The actual words I could not hear, but the sound of the voices was enough to make me anxious. So I knocked two or three times, but they took no notice. I opened the door, and went in. Marthe was in bed, or rather sitting up, all uncovered, though it was quite chilly, and sobbing, with her face in her hands. Cécile was leaning over her and talking vehemently right in her face. Her teeth were clenched and she was in such a blind rage that at first she did not even turn round. I went up to them and said : ' What has happened, children ? Have you both gone mad ? ' Marthe moaned : ' Papa, Papa ! She's too cruel to me. I haven't done anything to her. Why does she keep on tormenting me ? Why does she come and torture me in my own room like this ? ' At this Cécile gave me a stony glare, as if she could have bitten me. Then she got herself under control, smiled in a sort of way, and said ' You shouldn't have bothered, father, it's only play, we're teasing one another. I was talking to Marthe, and she was being silly. You can't say a word, without her squealing as though she were being flayed alive. If you start being sorry for her she'll go on crying for ever. She's just a spoilt baby. Little Benjamin ! Little cherub ! ' and she began smoothing the pillows for Marthe's head.

"It was pretty difficult to get any sense out of either of them, but anyhow, I got to what was at the bottom of it all. I believe you know already a little of what is happening, mademoiselle? Well, ever since our cousin, Pierre Febvre, set foot in my house those silly girls have quite lost their heads. I could see myself, from the start, that nothing but trouble would come of it. The very first day I saw him I came to the conclusion that that young man was not meant for us. He's a splendid fellow and at bottom perfectly honourable, I'm sure, but he hasn't our ways. He's much too clever, much too brilliant . . . yes, I mean it. We ought to have been less friendly with him, and even put the girls on their guard. But my wife thinks otherwise. From her point of view there was a husband for Cécile, all ready made, and all that remained was for her to give her consent. And then what? Both the girls fell in love with their cousin. Which one first? I hardly know. Certainly it seemed as if Cécile was not so very much interested in him, at first. For the character of Pierre Febvre and his general type are in some ways not particularly sympathetic to her. She, you know, is rather like those dogs that will leave a bone alone so long as no one wants to take it from them, and would rather die than give it up as soon as someone else seems to want it. Marthe, on the other hand, is a most affectionate creature. You, for instance, she adores. I give you my word for it. Not that she likes everybody, far from it. People have to be congenial to her; though, by the way, she hasn't much family feeling. But when she does get fond of anyone. . . . I must tell you that she always behaves in a most submissive sort of way . . . yes, both very obstinate and very submissive. Well, if Pierre Febvre wanted to marry Cécile, that she could have put up with. Remarkable, eh? But make her admit that she was doing wrong in loving her cousin, when he was practically engaged to her sister, above all try and make her give up the idea that her cousin really prefers her, Marthe, and loves only her, why, you might as well tear her into a thousand pieces! That is what so exasperated Cécile, that fashion of implying, with no anger or fuss: 'Marry him if you can; that's not my business, it's a family affair. But I shall have his heart.' They spend their whole time tormenting one another. Their

music, their piano lessons . . . I'm sorry to have to tell you this, well, my wife thinks it was she first thought of it because it was time her daughters' musical education was completed. Pooh ! It was nothing but jealousy. And all that was necessary was for Pierre Febvre, on one of his first visits, to talk music and seem surprised that our daughters could not play the piano. The next day Marthe feels she must learn to play, and Cécile is twice as anxious. That's simple enough. That's one of the things I can't endure in women. I can be frank with you, for you're a person of breeding and intelligence. I had a taste for music myself, when I was young ; I even started learning the flute. But that was because I was fond of music ; and that was all there was to it. In short, for I haven't come here to hash up something you're probably only too well aware of already, but only to tell you what happened last night, and which as a matter of fact does concern you a little though you probably don't see how you come to be mixed up in it. Are you sure your ears weren't burning in your sleep last night ? For if not, it's not my daughters' fault."

" Why, how is that ? "

" I'm ashamed to have to tell you. You'll never guess what new thing that wretched Cécile has invented to drive her sister to despair. She's determined to convince her that Pierre Febvre fell in love with you the moment he saw you. No lawyer ever set out such an array of arguments : that it was enough to look at Pierre Febvre when he was talking to you ; then when you were present he took no notice of anyone else ; that in your absence he did nothing but rave about your accomplishments, your manner and the things you had said ; that yesterday evening, when everyone thought he was going to stay to dinner as usual—in fact the maid was preparing something special just for him—he couldn't resign himself to letting you go, but compelled by an irresistible impulse suddenly decided to see you home. But there's something even more extraordinary to come. Cécile boasts that she followed you, or at any rate caught up with you, in town, and she had the impudence . . . But I'm sure you must be angry with me, mademoiselle. As I see it I seem to be behaving at this moment with the utmost rudeness. But, please, my dear young lady,

do take what I say in the spirit in which it is meant. You see before you a poor old father whose head is in a whirl and who comes to you as to a confessor. Please believe that I have no illusions about Cécile : the girl's half crazy and blurts out every silly thought that comes into her head. But I came to ask your advice, and how can you give it unless I tell you everything ? ”

“ Please, Monsieur Barbelenet. Please continue. Say whatever you wish, I promise you I shall not be offended.”

“ Well, she had the impudence to tell her sister that she saw you both—yourself and Pierre Febvre—talking tenderly to each other in the dark streets and lingering over your farewells right in the middle of the rue Saint-Blaise, as though you didn't care whether people saw you or not. . . . Once more you must pardon me for repeating such stupid gossip. But it would be on my conscience if I didn't tell you, since you are so devoted to our daughters and so frank and open. Don't be too angry with my poor Cécile. You would be perfectly justified in feeling extremely annoyed, for after all you are your own mistress, and even if Cécile's tales were true ten times over, what business is it of ours ? All the more reason—— ”

“ Don't, Monsieur Barbelenet, please ; there is no need to apologize so . . . just go on as if it concerned someone else.”

“ Well, naturally Marthe called her sister a liar and a she-devil. But I can answer for it that she was very upset. Nothing more spiteful could have been invented by Cécile. At this particular moment, Pierre Febvre and yourself, believe me, are easily the most important people in the world to Marthe, so you can imagine what a state of mind it puts her in, to think that you of all people should be taking Pierre Febvre's love from her. Oh, it would not be fury or even hostility, or any intention to hurt you even, but if she were really convinced that it was true she would be most frightfully disappointed. Here it is : the hardest for her would be not so much perhaps her cousin's loving you instead of her, but that you could ever bring yourself to love him. Because from that moment there could be no more doubt, and she would have to realize it, that there was someone in your life who counted far more than she does, whereas, up till now, there is nothing to prevent her

telling herself that perhaps she counts most. That I've seen clearly from her remarks on the subject. You wouldn't believe what you mean to that child. One day at table, it somehow happened that one of us said that some day or other you would get married, when of course you would give up your pupils. Well ! No one had any idea of it, but Marthe, who is generally so quiet, almost lost her temper. You would have thought she had been personally insulted. Ah, you know, children are very jealous at that age. When once they've attached themselves to you, you're not allowed to think of anyone else."

"Still, before I ever came to your house Marthe must have felt just as she does now, isn't that so ? It was her sister she was jealous of, wasn't it ? And the only person concerned was M. Pierre Febvre ?"

"True, true. But one doesn't preclude the other. I say again, you don't know that child. Nothing could seem more natural to her than for Pierre Febvre to prefer her above everyone, and you too. If her love for her mother is not particularly deep, it's because she has never got anything of the kind in return, chiefly because my wife, to begin with, is a person with whom it would be impossible. Before you came to the house there could, of course, have been no question of your being involved. But I tell you again that now my feeling is that what torments her most is the fear of losing you."

"But that's pure childishness. And why did she let Cécile work her up so ?"

"Cécile was so terribly persistent ! You know how it is. It's always easier to believe a lie than the truth, especially when it's a question of making oneself miserable. You, perhaps, you might manage to undeceive her if you took the trouble. But that wouldn't put things right . . . on the contrary . . . I really mean that, on the contrary. You see, don't you ?"

"And . . . what is Madame Barbelenet's opinion about it all ?"

At my question, M. Barbelenet made a vague gesture with the hand that held his hat, then with the other began to scratch the close-cropped pepper-and-salt hair on top of his head.

He looked down at the floor, then at the dressing-table.

He made a slight grimace, wrinkling his brows and opening his mouth. The old Gaul, with his ragged moustache, looked like a good old smuggler unexpectedly being questioned by the customs officials as to the contents of his bag.

"My wife? Yes, of course. . . . But then I must first explain, otherwise we shall never get things straight. My wife is undoubtedly better qualified than anybody to understand what is going on at home, and to decide what had best be done. She has more time than I have and she is a woman of great ability. But she has her own way of seeing everything. I sometimes think it a pity she was not born a man. Why, she could have made a career for herself with qualities such as hers. You can see that to manage a small household like ours, deal with its small matters and little everyday cares, is not particularly complicated. Why, anyone practically could make a good job of it. On the other hand you find certain people better suited to occupy really important posts. For instance, it is possible that in the High Courts of Justice or in the Government Service there may be men no more capable than Madame Barbelenet. Men very clear-sighted where important matters are in question, in which say, a man like myself would be at a loss; but on the other hand. . . . You grasp my meaning. . . . It's not at all that my wife takes no interest in domestic affairs, far from it. But she gets certain ideas into her head, and she is keener about following up these ideas than looking at what is actually happening. That, of course, is just how it should be in dealing with the affairs of nations.

"And then there's her health, which prevents her from going into every trivial detail. I often wonder how she manages to keep all her wits about her as she does, considering the suffering she has to put up with all the time. Not acute suffering, it's true, but in a manner of speaking, there's no end to it.

"You understand, we get on perfectly. But I should never dream of talking to her, for example, as I am talking to you now. Never. I may be wrong. But for example, we have never really seriously discussed either Pierre Febvre or Cécile's and Marthe's difficulties."

"But still, after last night's incident, you must have talked about it?"

"A little . . . but not particularly in reference to that."

"But Madame Barbelenet must have heard the noise that went on in your daughters' rooms?"

"Not very much. The two rooms are a good way from each other. And then, when the weather is changeable, as to-day, her illness is much more important to her. You can take it from me, too, that although she is most observant and nothing escapes her, she will often deliberately avoid noticing things, in order to keep up her authority, and because her belief is that parents who interfere right and left lose much of it."

"But surely Cécile must have been confiding in her mother for years? You say yourself the marriage was approved of by Madame Barbelenet from the beginning. Surely she would have had to discuss it then with Cécile?"

"Probably she did, but perhaps not in the way you think. You have no conception how my wife treats such matters. Nothing can make her dot her i's. Even though she is frankness itself. No one could call her crafty. If she happened to have anything against the bishop himself, she would let him know it, and be quite capable of showing him the door if he called. But what she can't endure are explanations. Personally, because of my work, I'm out of the house from morn to night, so that it's possible quite a lot is said at home that never comes to my ears. All the same I can't at all see Cécile confessing to her mother that she's in love with her cousin, or my wife sending for Cécile to discuss the choice of a husband with her. It may have happened, but I should be very surprised to hear it."

"And yet, someone must have been the first to think of this marriage . . . was it Cécile or Madame Barbelenet? . . . or perhaps M. Pierre Febvre?"

"It certainly couldn't have been Pierre Febvre. As for my wife and daughter, which of them, first . . . I'll tell you. Perhaps you haven't a very clear idea what is meant by family feeling. I mean a clear idea. Now I don't mean to be rude, but it is quite possible to come of a very good family, to have been very well brought up, to be very much attached to one's relatives and yet have no idea what is meant by family feeling in the minds of certain people. You may tell me that Cécile

and her mother are not particularly like each other. That may be. But the family feeling is there."

With that M. Barbelenet struck twice at the empty air with his hat like a person salving his conscience by a last tap at a nail which there is now no hope of fixing properly. He evidently felt his explanation, though inadequate, was well founded; and his eyes implored me to make the necessary effort to understand any obscure point in it, and to reconcile the various odds and ends of what he had said.

"Family feeling!" He nodded once or twice again, and looked at me, to see if his words set up in my mind the train of thought they had begun in his. He seemed also to be asking me to bear witness to the singularities no honest man could fail to recognize sooner or later in the world about him. It made him, despite everything, rather proud. He could not think of his wife or his elder daughter without a sort of admiration; and though he was ready to confess that he himself had no "family feeling" he was gratified that in his own house family feeling glowed so brightly. There was no need for him, personally, to be an adept of the cult in order to feel himself admitted into that charmed circle.

Some moments earlier, as he was speaking, a fierce gust of sympathy for him had swept through me, one of those impulses that make us feel we should have the strength spontaneously to break down the conventional barriers that separate us from each other, the strength to question everything, and to compel others, in common with ourselves, to build all their existences afresh on a foundation of truth. I all but said to him: "My dear old Barbelenet, I love you dearly, and I dearly love that poor babe of a Marthe. It was bad luck marrying a woman so unendurable, a matron who takes her absurd mannerisms for majestic civilities, 'dew please sit down,' who in reality is perfectly heartless, incapable of the most ordinary foresight, and lords it over her household to avoid the trouble of really attending to it; not to mention playing at being an incurable invalid so as to surround herself with a zone of deference whose density she can modify at will. As for Marthe, she's unlucky enough to have for sister a shrew, who possesses her mother's egotism, plus envy and resentful

bitterness. Have the courage to realize it and admit it, once for all ! That will do us all good." And for two pins I would have added : " Go and find your little Marthe and we'll all three talk things over. Here now, I shall cook something simple for us, a doll's meal, so that we can all three go on staying here in my room, with this cool sunlight glittering on my three odd plates."

There was nothing absurd, nothing really impossible in this impulse. Perhaps that was how it wanted to happen ; perhaps old Barbelenet had felt a similar urge at the same moment, but fainter because he was not so young and because his respect for the stern obligations of existence was more absolute. Possibly Marthe too even, far away at home, had at the same time as ourselves been seized with a desire to join us, so that her soul had found relief and some consolation in that thought.

But a moment after I no longer desire such a thing. All I remember is there is a lesson I am due to give in town. Barely five minutes remain in which to finish getting ready and arrive. I shall be late. In return, I shall have to let the lesson protract itself some minutes after noon. I shall get back to the hotel late. Marie Lemiez will not have had the patience to wait for me. She may even be eating her second course. That will make the meal seem all disorganized, wrong. My pleasure in the meal with Marie will be spoilt. Still another pleasure, still another of life's good things on which I counted, gone. As if there were not enough disagreeable things already ! I shall have to enter upon the vast desert of the afternoon with one more pleasure the less, make my way across it, and somehow find courage to last out till the evening, with no certainty of finding the least trace of any other on my way.

My brief day-dream must have lit up my face in a way M. Barbelenet was not subtle enough to interpret consciously, but no doubt it kindled a gleam of something similar deep in his soul. For all the time he was trying to find some means of protracting the conversation, it was obvious he was struggling inwardly with a feeling that he ought to be going.

If we were to part thus, I should be left in a quite intolerable state of mind, for his words had filled me with chaos, in which pleasure, hope and fear were so mingled, that I could not

completely give myself up to any of them. . . . Our talk had taught me much more than I really needed. But since it had to remain vague, it was as good as useless. It would only profoundly upset me, without affording me any relief in activity. But worse was the feeling that for a whole hour the Barbelenet invasion of my privacy, my glance, my very self, had not once been interrupted ; or the way in which it gradually monopolized both my present and my future. It hung menacing over me until I was almost stifled, an enormous face lowering so close that every detail was excruciatingly clear. Yet its eyes were shut. And somehow I could not grasp what it wanted me to do. Like things we see in dreams, so exhausting they can hardly be borne, because the phantom shapes unite things with which we are completely familiar, with others of which it terrifies us not to know about.

No, old Barbelenet cannot go like this. I must know what they want, what they expect of me.

" Monsieur Barbelenet, I am afraid I shall soon have to ask you to allow me to dress for going out. I have a lesson to give in town. . . . But there appears to be something still unsaid . . . of importance . . . Your coming to see me : was it not because you hoped I would do certain things ? "

" Mademoiselle . . . why indeed, I should have been delighted to return home with the means of arranging everything, if it were in your possession."

" Have you a feeling that . . . it is ? "

" That would be too good to be true."

" Perhaps you think the trouble is due to me, considering that your daughters quarrelled about me last night ? "

" No, mademoiselle, not at all. Whatever could put such an idea into your head ? "

" If I stopped coming, Cécile could no longer tell Marthe . . . for I hope they give me the credit of believing that I do not meet M. Pierre Febvre anywhere but at your house ? "

" There's no question of such a thing, mademoiselle."

" It's clear Cécile and Marthe will always be rivals. . . . But surely it shouldn't be impossible to get your cousin to say openly what he feels ? "

" That, mademoiselle, is just perhaps where you could help

us. I am not asking you to sound our girls. . . . That wouldn't help much now, and you would find it harder after what's happened. But you might possibly try and get some idea of what Pierre Febvre is really thinking."

"What do you really mean by that?"

"Perhaps what I'm asking you is not at all proper . . . don't think hardly of me. . . . But in coming to you I feel I am dealing with an utterly sincere person very much out of the ordinary. I am not forgetting that you are a young woman, even though you seem jollier, younger in character, and everything than most, Cécile for example. But even so, I know I can say things to you that can only be said to a mature person."

"But I can't see, Monsieur Barbelenet, what prevents you asking M. Febvre yourself. You or else Madame Barbelenet. He is your cousin. . . . A man, a decent man, I should think! There seems no reason why he should be afraid of answering!"

"Well, I'll try and talk it over with my wife. I know already what she'll say. You don't understand her, mademoiselle."

"But you yourself, Monsieur Barbelenet—what prevents you having an explanation with M. Pierre Febvre just as with me?"

"Yes, indeed. . . . Well, to be frank, I should hate to do it. It would look as though I were begging him to become my son-in-law. Or else it would look as if I had come to tell him he'd been too enterprising, had compromised our girls and that he owed us so much by way of reparation. I haven't always been at home; I haven't seen everything or heard everything, and I can't think anything very dreadful can have happened. Why he might reply: 'Really, my dear cousin, are you all mad in that house of yours? Why should I have either Cécile or Marthe. Am I to be compelled to marry because you were so hospitable to me. Why then you should put a notice on your door. Besides, in whose eyes are your daughters compromised? In the signalman's, who saw me cross the tracks from time to time, or the lamplighter's?' Well if that was how he answered, I should feel a fool."

"Whether it was said to you . . . or me?"

"No, no, it wouldn't be the same at all."

"Well then, can't you lead him to say something incidentally on the subject, in the presence of Madame Barbelenet? What you want, above all, is a solution, and that would be one."

"It may be . . . who knows?"

He got up and took a step or two. Then, still speaking, he began to examine my door, running his eyes over all of it with great attention, like a foreman working out an estimate. He didn't care in the least about my door. But his preoccupation gave free rein to certain workaday thoughts and my door happened to be a convenient playground.

"Of course, mademoiselle, you won't breathe a word of what we have just said. And when you see the girls—tomorrow, is it not, I imagine—try and act as if there's been nothing."

"But, Monsieur Barbelenet, as things are I shall find it very difficult to meet your daughters, especially if we cannot talk the matter over. Put yourself in my place."

"Well then . . . ?"

"Well then . . ." I had almost added: "Some explanation is inevitable," when suddenly I felt an aversion to discuss the matter which must have been similar to Madame Barbelenet's own. In certain respects Cécile was lying, but only in certain respects. And one of the first things that would happen would be that I should have to admit several important facts? And if I did prove to Cécile that she had wickedly distorted them, what a horrid discussion it would be. And how much prestige would there be left me after it? And also it was as if some event, preparing itself in the future, was defending itself, asserting its rights, refusing to be sacrificed to my pride, to a semblance of honour. I held my tongue.

Old Barbelenet was not surprised by my silence. He was, himself, excessively embarrassed by the situation.

But at last I managed to say:

"I must think it over a little. Have no fear for my discretion. If it seems absolutely necessary to have it out with your daughters, I'll tell you first. And in any case, thank you for having been so frank with me."

"Oh, what next! . . . Till to-morrow, then, mademoiselle?"

"Perhaps to-morrow."

"What ! Perhaps ? Why, you must come. I shan't go till you promise. Why, I should regret terribly having come. Do promise !"

"Well ! It shall be to-morrow, I promise."

XI

AND why, all said and done, had he come? His words at parting still left something vague, and yet they made me feel less anxious. No one had sent him, not his wife, nor anyone else. I do not think he kept anything serious back at the end or if he did, he had not realized it.

Somehow I feel I know fairly well what had moved him to come; not all his reasons, possibly, but the way in which he came to think it necessary. I could send them all packing, yet one thing is certain and that is that here and now we are terribly drawn to each other. If I were true to myself . . . there would be one thing only I really desired; one thing only that could at all satisfy me just now, and that would be to see Cécile and Marthe, first separately, then together; to be alone with them in that accustomed sombre room, questioning hurting, dragging the truth from each other, with cruelty, and even—who knows—insults; but even deeper would be the feeling that we were indissolubly linked, so that our insult could not be irreparable, nor destructive, since there could be no question of anyone indignantly flinging out of the room. What would unburden the heart would be the daring to let all your anger rage, till you had worked off all your malice knowing that the walls would prevent your running away once you had done so, and that afterwards there could be time to justify your rage, find excuses for it, possibly even ask pardon for it.

Yes, I can so easily picture Marthe, with her tear-filled eyes, and slender blue-white hands lying helpless in my own. Even Madame Barbelenet I would like to meet face to face—and heaven knows how unsympathetic I sometimes find her. To-day my mood is such that merely to think of her mannerism makes me clench my teeth; she too I want to face, put up with all her allusions and insinuations, even provoke them, gradual

drain her of every secret thought, force her, almost, to say what she hasn't even had courage to think. I would go without my lunch to rush off there, if I dared. Marie Lemiez? That meal together will be sickeningly dull. There is not the slightest complication in our friendship. Nothing links us. Anything we can say to each other means absolutely nothing to me. Meals with Marie . . . friendship with Marie. I see them rise into the air like some trivial toy balloon that slips out of a child's grasp and goes bouncing up against the ceiling.

And Pierre Febvre?

Pierre Febvre, yes. Do I want to see him, him too, at once, and have it out with him as well? No, not have it out with him, see him, perhaps; and yet not as one generally sees people. But as though he were a photograph, for instance, to be taken out of a drawer when one is alone, or a phantom that comes forward in a dream. Or, if we were in a room together, many people would have to be present; we should stand at a distance, we should say nothing to each other, we should scarcely exchange a look.

Yet, what a story I could tell him, what with old Barbelenet's visit, the quarrel between the sisters—their quarrel because of me and him! How agreeable such a conversation with Pierre Febvre would be, well worthy of his laughter, of being suddenly capped with his "Ha! Ha! Ha!" that still rings in my ears. He is walking on my left. He is a little taller than I am. We use the simplest words, yet they seem magical and barred to everyone except initiates. Their meaning is entirely between ourselves. No, nothing more delightful could happen to me to-day. But I perceive that it isn't our most delightful fancies that necessarily have first claim on our attention.

Something, I don't know what, is in the way of my desiring another meeting with Pierre Febvre just now. Perhaps what he said as we parted? But why? Did it seem too eager? I would like to believe that was the reason, but it does not convince me.

That evening, before dinner I had no inclination to go back to my room to read or try over a score. I tried to find excuses for loitering in the main streets. There was very little life in

them, even at that early hour. It was not the first time they had depressed me. My childhood in Paris had left in me a need for glittering illuminated crowds that charge one with new life.

A very little would have satisfied me then. The most modest glitter of a shop-window or three people grouped at a street corner were enough to evoke the intoxication of great cities. . . . I extended my indulgence so far as even to want to walk through the principal store, almost as though it deserved such a visit for the pure pleasure of the thing. But also a show of spring fashions had attracted some few people. Now and again I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirrors, but with my usual rather indifferent attention. Then for some reason I happened to stop immediately in front of a sheet of looking-glass. Between the glass and myself a number of veils were displayed, which provided a very natural reason for my stopping in front of them for a few minutes.

I glanced at myself. Chance—or so it seemed to me—determined that my first glance should be as unforeseen, as impartial as that of any passer-by. Doubtless I had profited by one of those moments in which the most familiar things seem suddenly strange to us, so much so, that a slight effort has to be made even to recall one's name or address. My face had been forgotten for an instant. The moment had come to discover it.

My first sensation was of deep pleasure, then immediately following came the thought: "What a truly beautiful face! Can that be mine? Am I then beautiful? So beautiful as that?"

Indeed, as between the pleasure and the verdict, it was the pleasure that counted most, for other more weighty verdicts were inherent in that pleasure. And far from being disinterested, it was on the contrary, charged with pride, and penetrated into my deepest fibres. But was there any other way for instinct to convey to me, or relate to me as the person chiefly interested, the verdict just passed by it, with the almost divine indifference proper to it?

I am beautiful, even though I say it myself. And I was not consciously aware of it. I have, of course, often studied myself in my glass, as all women must. Especially when I was

adolescent. Then there were times when the look was long and deep. But always it was as though I submitted to some painful cross-examination for which I had to win grace for a sentence already pronounced. What I always sought in my features was something that would get me off, as if my thought were : " Some decree excludes me from the category of truly lovely girls ; that is absolutely final. But to what extent can I delude others, or obscure their vision and my own ? .What light best suits me ? How shall I do my hair ? Does to-day's way of doing it best suit my face ? What expression should I permanently adopt to prevent people ever seeing how ugly I am ? "

A mere chance has broken the evil spell to which I was enthralled. I am beautiful. It is a reality about which there can be no more doubt. It is not a question of personal taste, there are no allowances to be made. What a real discovery to make, one which seems to me to have incalculable consequences. A little more and I should be terrified of it. Was I not more calm when my looks seemed just passable ? If I am truly beautiful, there will be no more need for the perpetual slight effort to catch the most favourable aspect of myself in fleeting mirrors, or for those instinctive adjustments of the body my eyes fear to see too clear. Yet, all things considered, that constant effort was not so very displeasing. It was the same sort of pleasure as working like a poor woman. Wealth and the good things of life I could bear as well as the next, I stand in no fear of them crushing me. But to have to be sufficient to oneself when that is all there is ! Or to try and make yourself happy or lovely ? That is good too. Yes, I love the ascetic's drawn brows and tight lips.

This, perhaps, is the very first time I have ever really thought of loveliness, I mean, really thought—or at least, of the amazing enhancement beauty undergoes when it alights on a living face. I have often had to admit the beauty of other women, or of certain men I met. But in the case of the women, a kind of impalpable scorn always seemed immediately to veil the thought of their beauty, and it was upon this my gaze most readily concentrated, as though to give it form. It seemed to me there were two categories, practically two races of women,

the beauties and the rest, myself among the latter. And without ever honestly working it out, I accepted as axiomatic that the beauties could not, as the price of their beauty, be admitted to the lofty regions of the life of the spirit. That old question : "Have women souls?" whose barbarity made me shrug my shoulders when applied to women in general, seemed a rather pungent witticism in connection with some beautiful passer-by.

Where men were concerned, my views were far otherwise. And certainly, I then used the word beauty in a somewhat different sense. Beauty in a man, for me, was inseparably bound up with a certain nobility of the features, a certain dignity of expression, depth, or at all events, vivacity and intelligence in the eyes. But when I met the average features of some "handsome fellow," it did not take me long to place him in the category of things that appeal to the baser instincts—cheap pottery, sugary paintings, sentimental street songs—which good taste keeps outside our everyday life ; in fact there was not even time to wonder whether, were such a person to declare his love for me, its coming from such a mouth might manage to trouble me, by evoking some complicity of my animal self.

By a strange inconsistency I called beauty in women what I should have blushed to admire in a man. Was that to give myself the comfort of feeling some slight measure of scorn for every woman who might have seemed lovely to me ? Or was it, perhaps, to gratify some hidden wish to mortify myself ? I mean, to prevent me recognizing I was beautiful myself, and to thwart once and for all the longing that every woman has to be beautiful, and the joy she takes in her beauty.

But I have moved. Here is another mirror. No ! There is no common link, no possible compromise between beauty and the petty values of our daily life which have so far mattered to me. No meeting point at all. Beauty should go unperceived, be impinged on vaguely, not meditated on, but only interpreted with vague conventionality. Begin to think about it, look it in the face, it will take on sudden life and naught else will remain. A lovely face ! How suddenly that can become something terrible and mysterious. A lovely face, fixed in immobility. What makes one suddenly think that here you have a torrent in full spate, an immense force that pours

inexhaustibly from the heights, to sweep everything away before it? Yet nothing has moved. Nothing has happened. Not even a quiver of an eyelash."

I have stopped looking at myself now. I no longer think about myself. I do not think of anybody. But I understand now how it is possible to muse upon the outline of a nostril, or the curve of a lip, for hour on hour and never be satiated. The eye must needs continually return to the contour of the nose and cheek, pressing upon, wedding the lines once more, experiencing yet again their irresistible power. The soul says: "Beautiful visage, devastate me! Fill me completely, if you can. But no, you cannot. For as you plunge, you make that hollow vaster."

Pierre Febvre. . . . Yes, Pierre Febvre. Why should I not think of him, and wonder what my spirit will make of him, feeling as I now do. His face. When I looked so fixedly at him that day, it was as though I felt nothing of all this. How calm I was, how reasonable. How strange; and what a pity! Why a pity? What does that mean? Was I then seeing him as I just saw myself? That gaze went deep. Yes, but only seeming to go deep. I was on my defence, rather. A first means of defence is not to see. But when you have not been able to stop seeing, then you must speedily improvise a way to see. The mind seeks frantic issues. Thoughts are piled pell-mell as if to stop a dyke.

What a pity he is not here or that I am not in the same place with him, where there would be no need to speak to each other. A tram, for instance. I should be sitting facing him. And to-day I would make sure whether his face reveals that terrible power I have only just discovered. I call to mind his features. With a slight effort I succeed in picturing him. But the image is almost lifeless. At the moment I welcomed it in my spirit. I must have rendered it innocuous. Or rather . . . How extraordinary it is that I cannot at this moment say whether Pierre Febvre is beautiful. . . . In a sense every idea accumulated by me to date is of no further value, has been withdrawn from currency. The only legal tender from now on is what I make myself.

And he, Pierre Febvre, is he already aware what beauty is?

Then what does he think of me? Certainly he seemed to have picked me out, but not in order to experience that vast moral defeat that I can realize now. No feature trembled; he did not bite his lip or turn pale. No flash of bewildered adoration leapt into his eyes.

As to his words about love bursting forth from the first contact of all men and all women, it had its serious side and I feel that a secret truth lies behind it, that smilingly he touched on one of the secrets of existence. How does that fit in with my discovery? Those thousands who pass by in the streets of Marseilles and the sparks crackling everywhere. Yes, I see all that. But its beauty? What is there in common between the fugitive mingling of two glances and the prolonged and searching devastation of a human soul by some lovely face? And even if I managed to reconcile these two things, how can I fit them in with what I, personally, have always felt about love? If I loved a man, I am positive I should love no other. Even for instance, having begun to love Pierre Febvre and then meeting a face more beautiful than his; the most beautiful face in the world?

A number of men have just passed by. They looked at me. In the eyes of two at least a gleam told me they found me beautiful. Yet it may even be that they love some woman, love her very deeply.

I should like to discuss this with Pierre Febvre and question him. There is no one else I know who would understand my difficulty. Marie Lemiez would make nothing of it. Yes, he is charming, perhaps frivolous even and hasn't much respect for women; he doesn't mind upsetting them. But he's not fatuous. It must be unusual to find so little fatuity in a person with so little timidity. Suppose I told him what was bothering me. I don't believe he would be so silly as to think something that wasn't true; no, he would discuss it with me in perfect good faith. He might even be self-possessed enough to take our own case as an example, just so that we could know where we were. And it would all blow over with a laugh.

Pierre Febvre and his laughter. Or what I call by that name, that brilliance in his voice which is more luminous than laughter. Some secret is hidden in that too. His laughter,

and the laughter he makes you feel, the laugh which continues inside you. It seems to have no link of any kind with beauty, yet neither your spirit nor anything around you can resist the power of transmutation that there is in such laughter. After, it is impossible to see things as you saw them before, an unknown light has stirred and broken everything up. Suppose now, I heard Pierre Febvre laugh, what would become of all my thoughts? Suppose I heard him laugh just as my eyes were questioning a mirror? Would I stop being beautiful? Or would it seem suddenly that beauty did not matter? No, truth would still be true, but a truth untrammelled suddenly, like chanting voices, leaping from bass to treble.

The shop was behind me and I was again in the street. Robbed of my lights and mirrors, my exaltation of beauty faded slowly away. People passing seemed full of other thoughts. What were they thinking? A deal in seeds . . . a job to finish, a game of cards before dinner in some dreamy café.

I longed for Paris. At six in the evening, Boulevard Montmartre, there is room and to spare for all the countless thoughts in everybody's heads. But let some lovely woman pass and they all know it. Tired as they are, hastening to get home, they have still time enough and soul enough for that lovely face to work in them the devastation that now perpetually fills my mind. Unlike Pierre Febvre I cannot picture the Cannebière, which I have never seen. Instead, I think of the Boulevard Montmartre. Nor can I entirely, like him, call up a picture of those innumerable instantaneous contacts of men and women. He called them sparks, sparks crackling on all sides, a sudden flash of love between two beings turning away from each other. It must be so. But this evening I cannot stop thinking of a beautiful face lit up by the light of the street at evening, seen by the flowing crowds. And passing, that lovely face leaves in them all a sting. Half enchantment and half anguish, it sinks in deep. A lovely woman, and in every man there is a sudden sense of bitterness that he cannot possess her; and that exquisite drop of poison he carries away will leave a taste on his lips more abiding than all the painful effort of his day.

XII

TWO hours before the lesson, I was still undecided whether I should go to the Barbelenets'. Nor had I any better idea what attitude would be best if I did go. But really I think I was only seemingly irresolute. If something had suddenly happened to prevent my going, I should have been most disappointed. It even seems to me I should have gone in any case.

The house welcomed me in the most indifferent manner. Neither the door, the hall, the maid's gestures as I entered the drawing-room, nor the handshakes of the girls held any menace of something to come. So much the better. I had no desire to expend my stock of courage on slight preliminary obstacles. The maid's lamentations for instance, or the sight of Marthe alone and in tears, would have been a strain from the beginning. Possibly the girls thought the same.

Our coming together that day had been somehow inevitable, irresistible. Our reluctances, our submission to suffering had all been surmounted. Each of the sisters may perhaps have made up her mind to cut the lesson ; Marthe for fear of revealing her resentment, Cécile because her conscience was uneasy. Yet, in effect, both were present. And strange as it may seem, the first moments were pleasant for all of us. Our proximity had all the charm of surprise, an achievement belying the most rational anticipations, and we treated it carefully as if it were some rare and fragile object.

In fact, I thought, with a sardonic inward smile, we have here all the elements for a perfect understanding, for a whole lifetime together. What a pity such a situation cannot last. A sort of prejudice makes us think the only equilibrium worth maintaining between people is that based on happiness. Everything else we call a crisis, and we have no rest till we have brought it about. We have got used to seeing pleasure only in

those things we can with facility relate to ourselves, the things which our beings incline to call pleasure from their own point of view. But under the vexations, the obvious torments that others may cause us, a very real pleasure may lie concealed, originating precisely in the profound kinship they have with us. But somehow we do not quite know how to deal with it, and we only let it endure and flourish when some outside circumstance compels us to do so.

Whereupon I began to think of the state of marriage, with a feeling that with another five minutes in which to meditate on the subject, I should make some conclusive discovery. But conditions were unfavourable.

I sat down at the piano. I began to turn over the music. "Did you find time to practise the bars that weren't quite right last time, you know, from C on?"

And, without turning, in my most ordinary voice, I added: "Wasn't it you who bowed to us in the rue Saint-Blaise, the night before last, Mademoiselle Cécile? The night M. Pierre Febvre was seeing me home?"

"Yes . . . it was."

"I thought it must have been. But in town at that time of night, I always feel it's more likely I shall meet the pupils who live in town. You see, it's about the only time in the evening that the poor old rue Saint-Blaise does show a little life. But you should have come along with us, if you had something to do there."

I turned round. Cécile seemed embarrassed. She looked briefly and anxiously at me and then at two or three objects in the room, and then at a corner of the room, and back again at me, and then away again.

As for Marthe, a sort of timid light shone in her face. My coolness and her sister's confusion made everything doubtful. All she wanted was to be able to believe in me.

So easily did she transfer her allegiance that I began to have a conscience about it. Or rather I felt she was acting rather too quickly on the hidden protest she detected in my words. I was not going to have her attribute more to me than I had said. I was committed to nothing. I had given up nothing.

"Will you, Cécile, try this passage first please, alone? You

nearly always make the same mistake, just where the left hand follows on. Take care now."

She sat down at the piano. I saw her profile, her nose and the lines of her mouth. The signs of youth in them seemed present merely as a sop to convention. In that mouth, the teeth seemed a careless stop-gap, the lips on the point of tightening, the eyes on the point of sinking deep into their sockets in a mesh of wrinkles. A crabbed old woman seemed anxious to tear off her mask.

"You know, Mademoiselle Cécile, I have a feeling you tell yourself beforehand that you can't help going wrong. You're too nervous. You seem fascinated by the mistakes you are going to make. You must make an effort. Will you try it again, please?"

So charitably admonished, Cécile could not help going wrong. As her fingers came nearer to the difficulty, they lost what little confidence they might have had. Inevitably, the same headlong panic took possession of them; they began racing blindly over the keys, and at the given point flung themselves once more into the same fault, which Marthe's and my own silence seemed to make stupendous.

I knew I was being treacherous; but I am not naturally cruel. I had to incite and justify myself to go on with it. I kept my eyes on Cécile's profile. I thought of her mean trick two days earlier. It seemed to me to be almost an act of kindness to force souls like hers to reveal—if only through a piano's notes—the ingratitude of their natures, and make the false note so stubbornly repeated seem a sort of penance, like so many blows struck by Cécile on her breast.

Wanting to prolong her ordeal and lacking the courage, I had actually to rise, and on the pretext of approaching the piano, contrive to see myself in a mirror hanging to the right of the uncle's portrait. It made me certain of my beauty. And surely beauty could well permit itself three minutes of injustice?

Meanwhile, Marthe was trying to read my face. She was acute enough to realize that in some measure I was punishing her sister. Without having precisely my grievances, she nevertheless shared in my revenge. Since she too was not particularly vindictive, so mild a punishment was very gratifying

to her. Nevertheless, there was no proof yet that Cécile had lied. In Marthe's eyes, there was a kind of tender reproach, not so much at me but rather offering itself. "Do you deserve my resentment? Have you betrayed me? And how?" And immediately after, it seems to me she turns her reproaches against herself: "Have I any right to complain? Hasn't Pierre every reason to prefer you to me? At one time I was the less displeasing of his two second cousins. But now he has seen you, has heard you play, has talked to you about so many things I know nothing of, why should he be foolish enough to prefer me to you?" And at this point her face resumed the look of childish resignation to which it seemed vowed. But somehow it was not enough merely to give up Pierre Febvre, for that was only half the sacrifice. Now the other edge of her affliction made her shudder suddenly and recoil. "And you? You too, do you love Pierre Febvre? If you love him, then no other person counts for you. You will leave me, forget me. For you're not like me. There is only one person in the world, I know it deeply, who is capable of an extraordinary thing like loving Pierre, yes, and loving you, you, as no one else loves you."

I was not deaf to her questioning, and I should have been glad to avoid replying. I preferred to let her understand, by my bearing, by my glance, by some sort of testimony of my thoughts, that the mild martyrdom of her sister was dedicated to her. It was offered to her like a pledge and as a mark of favour. To such an extent even that our desire for Cécile to get up impatiently, stammering some angry excuse, and leave us to ourselves, was on the whole less intense than our desire to keep her with us, close at hand, with her back to us, in an admirable state and situation to favour the exchange and harmony of all our complicated feelings.

Such a situation could not altogether pass unnoticed by the elder girl. I am sure she felt our weight upon her shoulders like a burden, or rather like some compelling power, and like another's entertainment at one's own expense. I am convinced she felt some of the humiliation and impatience of a harnessed beast.

But the game had to end: I had to let Cécile rest and make Marthe practise.

Cécile came and sat in the chair Marthe had vacated. As the same exercise was repeated the situation had not changed much in appearance.

After a moment's embarrassment, Cécile began to stare at me almost fixedly with her grey-green eyes. Only when my own met them squarely did they turn away a little. But immediately I thought of something else the grey-green eyes came back to me.

It was impossible to ignore their questioning. As much as I refused to hear someone tapping lightly and persistently on our door.

It all seemed obvious. Cécile first wanted me to turn my thoughts openly in her direction. No half attention would suffice; nor even if I relinquished myself to the three of us, united by the same pain. "Me, me," said the grey-green eyes, "think only of me for a little! Only look into me, receive from me what I have for you. Look, I might resent your cruelty, I might withdraw into my shell. But I don't resent it. I don't withdraw. There is something better I can do. I tell you, you don't understand at all. You were right in feeling I was very important to you, but you have interpreted it wrong. I know you don't like me. But it doesn't matter. I have a secret for you, your secret. Because you dislike me, will you be so obstinate as to persist in misunderstanding?"

So far I understood the message of the grey-green eyes pretty well. But what followed I found incomprehensible. It was evident I was being implored to guess some mystery, to amend my error, to take advantage without delay of what was being offered me. The eyes abused me almost. "Fool! If I only were in your shoes! You don't deserve it."

But there was so little friendliness in that appeal. It froze and confounded me. I lost any desire to understand.

It was after this that the preliminary symptoms of a most strange disorder began to manifest themselves in me. Infinitely slight to begin with, they became more and more pronounced until I left the house; to such an extent that I cannot remember anything else of how the lesson ended.

All I can remember is the disorder in my feelings at that time, my indifference to everything round me, my complete self-absorption, the palpitation of my whole being in preparation for some interior event which frightened me, its origin was so mysterious, its progress so rapid.

Only what happened on that day of all days in my life is of any help to me in recalling it, unless it be the mysterious, the solemn way in which fever took hold upon me once or twice when I was young.

Thus, I remember how, early one afternoon, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, I happened to be staying with friends. We were drinking our coffee and talking. My morning had been most uneventful. Suddenly, it seems as if something has been imperceptibly released in me, as if something as delicate as a watch-spring had relaxed in my body, as if a wire, as fine as a hair, had snapped. Whereupon everything around me seems to totter as though struck, and to recede backwards. The air grows hazy and thick between me and the nearest objects. I go on speaking, smiling. But in my body, which seems as vast as a kingdom, a province shut in by mountains under a lowering sky, there is profound silence. Then, at a given signal, which I have not noticed, suddenly it is as though swarms of tiny thoughts, charming and melancholy too, begin to creep out of the holes in which they hide, to go crawling and tingling all through my body.

An hour later I was in bed, so shaking with fever that I had to press my knees together with my hands to restrain their trembling a little.

This is what comes to my mind when I think of the agitation which took possession of me at the Barbelenets'. But this time I did not for a moment think it the onset of fever. For my body was not separate from the event, far from it; indeed, a distinct chill invaded my cheeks, clung close about my trunk, penetrated even to a certain depth and rippled through every limb. This time I knew it was not my body that was concerned, mainly because of all the potentiality with which my anguish seemed charged. Sickness too, conveys the same feeling of potentiality, but in that case it is limited and hems one in.

Besides, in the first shudder of fever, there is undoubtedly

pleasure, and even passion. But it is wholly within us, affecting our very flesh. That shudder of fever rippling through one is as if our life itself recoiled in sudden terror upon itself, groping and twining shiveringly about its own ramifications.

On the contrary, what took hold of me then, tended to detach itself and detach me from myself, and suck my life up out of its mortal coil. All the tumultuous agitation of my soul seemed to be determined I should bear it, not in my brain or in my breast, not in the protected thickness of my body, but in front of me, in the sort of spiritual domain that seems to form somewhere near our heads, when many are gathered together.

And only rather later did a definite image appear inside that tumult and throw light upon it.

The face of Pierre Febvre, his glance, the upper portion of his torso. A pucker of his lips in talk. A thrust of his right shoulder to accompany some phrase like : " It would probably be better if there were a little bar there for the platelayers and firemen."

The eyes of Pierre Febvre, dark, profoundly dark. The head, a little to one side, as he seems to examine some distant object with amusement. At times, a sidelong look at you, to make sure you too are pleased by the idea that pleases him.

The expression is vivacious. But it is not the vivacity of eyes rapidly calculating their own advantage in every encounter. No, it is a resourceful aliveness, and is given without reserve.

Beauty . . . but first let me think of his smile. Or rather, of how some thought, more eager or malicious than the rest, leaps from his eyes and spreads in all the puckers that appear then in his face. The face of Pierre Febvre suddenly shedding its smiles, as another might shed tears.

The beauty, the terrifying beauty of Pierre Febvre's face.

And his laughter, which I do not hear, which I do not seek to hear, for which I merely prepare myself. It is not his laughter I am imagining, it is my anticipation of it ; it is my spirit, strained and expectant like a child's, that has been told some wonderful trick is going to be performed and is all eyes, wishing almost that nothing will come of it—terrified by the too great pleasure that threatens it.

The laughter of Pierre Febvre, that will transfigure everything.

I had to confess then " I love Pierre Febvre — I am in love with Pierre Febvre." I had just enough freedom of spirit left to feel astonishment at the manner in which love had revealed itself to me.

I had very often thought of love since my childhood days. I thought I had even once or twice experienced its first qualms. But always something I had read, corrected, or filled out the idea I already had of it. Above all, it was my own instinct which, with no indecision, dictated my attitudes, so much so that at times, when the world looked grey or I had been mentally excited, I would think : " The routine of my life gives me very little chance of experiencing love itself. No matter. I know it all already. An actual love experience could only be a sort of anxious verifying of the love I have already experienced in myself. By renouncing it, I lose nothing and keep available for crowds of things those energies of the soul which in most women find so limited an application." If I followed these thoughts to their conclusion, I would add : " The one thing I feel I have no real idea of is the physical possession of a woman by a man, and the tumult of the soul that must accompany so unique an event. Some day, other women to whom I am superior in so many ways, will discern, will scorn in me this fundamental ignorance with all the protracted adolescence it implies." And daringly I imagined : " Whatever happens I must experience that thing once, in some remote place, with someone I do not know, in disguise, on a journey, wearing a veil, and then forgetting everything about it, except the essential and, as it were, abstract of the experience." Then I would hurriedly change my thoughts.

Clearly I was in love with Pierre Febvre. The profound nature of my disturbance was proof conclusive that love, in an obscure but pure form, was what possessed me, and not some more general feeling.

That Pierre Febvre should be the object of this love was not particularly extraordinary. From any outside point of view it might have seemed almost humiliating for me, so possible, so

dictated by circumstances did it seem. But even so, I was none the less astonished. At the moment I had been forced to avow my love, I had not recognized it as such. What then was so surprising in what I was going through? My almost feverish trembling, my mind's obsession by Pierre's image, my life suddenly sucked up out of its usual confines, was this not passion as the world imagines it? Yes, as regards the psychological event, as regards the mental picture. But even if the events and the character of such critical moments are easier than the rest to describe, and seem in memory of most importance at the time itself, I felt clearly that it was not indeed what counted most, and to-day too I feel that it is not the most important element to recapture.

I hesitated to acknowledge that love because I had never, till then, imagined under the name of love the essential savour of that emotion which now filled my being, or, more accurately, the manner in which my soul would go to meet it. Yes, what was strange, unexpected, impossible for me, the young woman of the day before, to have foreseen in myself, was the attitude of my soul.

An attitude as of one "condemned." That is not indeed exactly true, but it is the nearest I can get. I admit, certainly, that to respond as one "condemned" does not necessarily imply despair or even sadness. I am thinking of someone "condemned," who accepts his sentence and resigns himself to it as quite inevitable, yet is ready to put up with it, and, in consequence, finds therein a certain measure of happiness. Yet nevertheless, condemned, and bowed down by it.

And there came back the memory of that evening, when, lying in my bed, I had heard the two clocks. It came back of itself, spontaneously, not modified in any way, without any hope that an explanation might be found for it. Neither of these circumstances resembled the other, nor the states into which they had thrown me. Nevertheless, I was conscious of I know not what affinity between them, such as might unite two historical events, though not at all of the same order, nor occurring in the same places, nor to similar peoples.

As though some principle, some manifestation of the spirit, revealed first that night when I had listened to the striking

clocks, had been swept far away into the gusty, vast universe, only to reappear again, very close, sustaining me, inside me; but as in a new incarnation, embracing me more tightly, and much more definitely menacing than the old; to try and tear from me, for ends even less to be guessed, the same submission and the same soul's cry.

XIII

THE following Friday, when I get back to the hotel for lunch, I find a letter propped up against my table-napkin. It turns out to be a note in Cécile's handwriting to this effect :

" Sunday next we find we have to go to F—— - les-Eaux. We propose taking a carriage. M. Pierre Febvre will call for mother and myself about nine in the morning. It's his party and he will show us round the place. We shall pass by Notre Dame d'Echauffour, which is practically on the way. Do you know it? The church is very beautiful and it will be nice for mamma to be there for a bit of the High Mass. It would be charming if you could come with us. We should all be delighted. The carriage will get us back in plenty of time. Saturday at the lesson, would do quite well for the answer. But we are counting on you."

And then, as a P.S. :

" Father and Marthe will not be coming with us. They both leave for Paris, Saturday afternoon. My father has to see one of the Directors on Sunday morning, and Marthe, with someone to go with her, is taking the opportunity to pay her respects to one of our aunts, her godmother, whose birthday it is. They propose returning Sunday evening by the 6.59. In which case, we shall all dine together here."

In addition, there was a second postscript overleaf :

" That reminds me. Marthe finds she cannot have her lesson to-morrow as arranged. As we generally practise together, it seems hardly worth while for you to put yourself out merely on my account. Besides, it will be a little holiday for me too. So don't bother to write, unless you can't come Sunday. If we don't hear we shall expect you."

"I recognize Cécile's writing," said Marie Lemiez.

"Yes, it's just a little note, nothing important, about tomorrow's lesson."

Marie Lemiez happened to be particularly chatty that day, but all through the meal she had the greatest difficulty in getting even the most mechanical answers out of me. Luckily, Marie is not frightfully observant. If she ever does try to read people's thoughts, she always takes the first hypothesis that comes to hand.

Not that I found her company distasteful, even on this occasion. Quite otherwise, for her calmness counteracted my agitation. The speed at which my mind was moving would have been overwhelming, but for the truly rustic stolidity of the brake she administered from without. Indeed, it was really thanks to her that some sort of order was introduced into the confusion of all my secret thoughts. But for Marie, I really do believe they would have galloped away and out of hand, leaving me delivered up to the tumults of passion.

What should I decide? But I knew: the question did not really arise. It was obvious that Sunday morning at nine o'clock I should be at the Barbelenets', and possibly even at ten minutes to nine. To see Pierre Febvre again was a need. How I saw him did not particularly matter. If, instead of a letter from Cécile, Pierre Febvre himself had written to me, making some impossible assignation, I should have been just as incapable of refusing, though, no doubt, for a quarter of an hour or so I should have pretended to think myself highly indignant. But afterwards I would have begun to think out some face-saving way of consenting. As it happened, however, circumstances were acting the part for me.

There even seemed something too natural about the event. something so natural that it terrified me. If only, I felt, I were more stupid, or rather, more able to remain half-comatose when it seemed indicated. Marie Lemiez in my place, for instance, would have been delighted at the prospect of a very pleasant outing; and would be very content to leave in the background such aspects as no doubt have the best of reasons for staying there. For Cécile's letter is altogether frank and uncalculating. Only a very suspicious nature could suspect it.

All the same I cannot help guessing that old Barbelenet and the younger sister are not meant to take part in our outing. The appointment with one of the directors and the godmother's birthday make what I would call too much of a coincidence.

Then, too, there is clearly some objection to to-morrow's lesson taking place, to Cécile and I being alone together for an hour before the excursion. Possibly, because in spite of ourselves, we might happen to get talking of things which for the moment had better remain unsaid. When three are present there is no great difficulty in maintaining an official attitude and protracting it somewhat. But with two, with the least emotional tension in either, the situation becomes extremely difficult. The thoughts we use for communication lack authority over the thoughts which lie deeper, and they struggle to find an issue.

And why the dinner? The dinner seems quite inexplicable to me. On Sunday at seven the family comes together again. Nothing remarkable in that. Marthe's and her father's exile can hardly last more than twenty-four hours. It goes without saying that in such a family there will be no wide deviation from accustomed routine. Then what is the idea of bringing me into the family?

Yet in all justice, if I was astonished by being invited to dinner, how much more astonishing the invitation to the excursion should seem. I don't want to think about it. Why bother to find out? The Sunday excursion looms in front of me like a sphere of fog glowing with light. My eyes dwell on it with pleasure, and that suffices.

The conveyance was waiting for us in the station yard: it was a trap, with room and over for four, not to mention the driver. It was half-past nine before we started. I had feared from Cécile's letter that Pierre Febvre might be driving us himself, which would have separated him from us. But he merely directed the driver as to the route he wanted taken.

Madame Barbelenet, helped by her daughter, climbed first into the trap. She was wearing a black silk dress, rather more ceremonious than was necessary for the occasion, and which

would have looked ridiculous in a motor-car, but was not so in the trap. We looked pretty much like a squireen's family driving in to High Mass. Which was, in fact, what we were doing.

As she got up on the carriage step Madame Barbelenet could not refrain from giving us to understand the agonies of suffering it caused her. But she smiled also as if to say : " To-day we are letting ourselves go a little. And if this frolic does cost us three months on our back, well, that's as it may be."

Cécile invited me to get in next. As I was about to sit beside her mother she said : " No, please, Mademoiselle Lucienne, if you don't mind, I'll sit with mamma. It would be better, in case she wanted anything." Why, I did not see in the least, but I did as requested.

That left an empty place on my left for Pierre Febvre. I could have seen him better if he had been sitting opposite me. Our eyes could more easily have met. But it would have been more difficult for me to hide my agitation ; and having him at my side was pleasant too, and significant, and a sort of omen.

Would he think me beautiful in profile ? Was I not more beautiful full-face than profile ? I knew better how I looked full-face. But he was as much used to seeing me full-face as side-face. When I had played the piano, and also the evening of our walk, when he had let himself be drawn almost into making a sort of declaration of love, that was how he had seen me.

Against that there would be the ordeal of the combined scrutiny of Madame Barbelenet and Cécile all through the journey. The whole drive was going to be a sort of confrontation. Over the heads of the two women I pictured the uncle's portrait, completing the tribunal of judges. It was lucky I had not thought of it earlier. It was easier to put up with unforeseen.

Our first remarks were to the effect that the weather, though not actually glorious, was delightfully seasonable, that the wind was just the right coolness, and the clouds not seriously threatening, though possibly we might have a slight shower in the afternoon.

Upon which Madame Barbelenet declared that she did not believe a drive like this could be injurious to the health,

provided one was well wrapped up. It was true that Mademoiselle Lucienne's health did not appear to give her much cause for alarm. "This morning, mademoiselle, you are looking splendid."

Pierre Febvre turned towards me. It seemed to me as if he were about to say something terrific, something to make me want to sink through the earth. But immediately he caught back his words, and only the slightest sound issued from his throat. Then he asked me: "Have you ever gone in for sport, Mademoiselle Lucienne?"

"No; or at any rate, I have never thought of calling any exercise I might have taken, by that name."

"That's how it should be. No doubt, that's why you look so well . . . without looking athletic. Personally, I find athletic women somewhat alarming. I come across dozens of them aboard ship. Their blood seems to be circulating in a way that seems to me rather too obvious. Every time they breathe you'd think they were discovering oxygen for the first time. Besides, it gives them such a depressing expression. I'm afraid I have the prejudices of the South on that point."

All this time I had not dared look at Madame Barbelenet, who, though listening to Pierre Febvre's remarks, seemed to be examining me with appalling impartiality; nor at Pierre Febvre either, for his voice alone was enough to shatter me, and his eyes at that moment could have driven me to heaven alone knows what madness. Nor could I even concentrate my gaze on the floor of the vehicle, or on the driver's coat, or on anything except one of us four. Accordingly, I had to look at Cécile, and after various efforts to permit my gaze linger on her clothes, her breast, her neck, I finally came to the point when I could actually meet her eyes, which never left the person of Pierre Febvre except to fasten upon mine.

All the same I could read nothing in those eyes. The grey-green pupils took no chances at betraying for my advantage any of the restless thoughts which flitted behind them. If our glances met, my most definite impression was that there was a difference of level and a declivity that led from the soul in front of me to my own. That feeling of being physically affected, of being in some sort the target of some onward

gliding force, absorbed me, made it impossible for me to comprehend what this subtle motion corresponded to in the soul opposite me, nor the exact kind of obedience it was seeking in me.

Then it was I realized that once another's soul affects us with sufficient domination, just that feeling alone suffices to take possession of us, as it does to astonish us. We demand nothing more to satisfy our desire for happenings. It is as though perpetually within us there was either a regret for, or expectation of this fundamental adventure.

But I was beginning to discover also that love alone was able to make it endure. Scarcely was I aware of Cécile's influence upon me, and the temptation ~~in~~ me to submit to that unwholesome pleasure, than I began, with growing concentration, to think of Pierre Febvre, telling myself more and more passionately that I loved him. As though the glance exchanged with Cécile were a substitute for a glance exchanged with Pierre; as though I had called on the grey-green eyes to substitute themselves, just for a moment, for the dark ones that I dared not confront, as though I had given them permission to agitate me, and take possession of me, if in no other way, at least by suggestion.

"Have you had news of your mother lately, mademoiselle?"

I could not remember ever having been so directly questioned about my family affairs by Madame Barbelenet. I answered:

"Yes, a few days ago."

"And was it good news?"

"Very good. My mother's health has always been excellent."

"How I envy her, mademoiselle. But you really ought to make her acquainted with our part of the world, have her down here for a week or two. Such a short journey could not tire anyone. The air would do her good. And we should all be very pleased to see her."

"My mother's not very keen on travelling. Besides, her interests are all in Paris. You know, I believe that she has married a second time."

I said all this very quickly, stiffening inwardly, and as though challenging further curiosity.

"Yes, Mademoiselle Lemiez said something about it. We know how admirable you were through it all!"

Madame Barbelenet turned to her daughter :

" I fear we shall be too late for High Mass at Notre Dame d'Echauffour."

" We could tell the driver to go a little faster."

" Poor horse ! He's got quite enough to do already with so many of us. Whereas such a very small sin won't matter much if shared by the four of us."

She added :

" Yes, indeed, it must be very hard for a girl with feeling. It would not affect a young man nearly as much. Still, with your talent you had your independence, so to speak, at your fingers' ends. It is a precious gift. I have always thought a girl ought to be able to earn her own living, in case circumstances force her to it. It's a great stand-by. It doesn't necessarily mean she is bound to make it her life's work, or give up all idea of marrying. Someone was telling me the other day that the chief engineer was having his daughter taught shorthand and typewriting. And yet the Lord knows the child's hardly likely to starve with the money she will get from her mother. You may say being a typist is going a bit too far, but the chief engineer is a very up-to-date man."

" That reminds me," declared Pierre Febvre, with the youthful expression which sometimes spread around his eyes, " that I have no profession. I really must acquire one. What a good method of utilizing the rest of my leave that would be."

Madame Barbelenet began to laugh.

" Whatever do you mean, no profession ? Really, Pierre, what are you talking about ? "

" It's a fact, I haven't got a profession. I have certain amateurish gifts for a fair number of things, but none of them are anything much. I know something of photography and some mechanics ; but again, not much. I can wire for electricity, but if you asked me to make a proper job of it with concealed wires, I doubt if I should know how. And you know the companies won't pass flexible wiring. Then I can do a bit of doctoring and dispensing, good enough for a prison settlement or a wreck at sea, in circumstances, so to speak, where what the patient said would not count much."

" But how do you regard your own profession, then ? "

"You're joking. That isn't a profession, it's a perpetual being agreeable to people because they see I am in uniform, and it makes them ask me things. If I lent you my uniform, you'd do equally well. . . . Well, yes . . . now I think of it, there may possibly be the rudiments of a profession in it. It might lead to the hotel business, if one knew more about the technical side. I might take advantage of my stay at F——-les-Eaux to go more deeply into it. I am on excellent terms with the proprietor of my hotel and the valet on my landing, and I could easily get to know the manager of a more fashionable hotel. H'm yes. What do you think, Mademoiselle Lucienne?"

He looked straight at me. I wanted to lay my head on his shoulder, put my arms round him and say I would help him run a hotel all my life, if he would have me ; and even play the piano to the commercial travellers in the drawing-room all the evening.

"Of . . . your present occupation . . . or your idea?"

"Do you think hotel-management can really be called a profession? You see my point? I'm afraid not. As for instance, if there were a revolution, would hotel managers be classed as necessary, like tailors, I wonder?"

"Perhaps if a knowledge of cooking were added——"

"Ah, yes indeed! that's a capital idea. A hotel-keeper who is a cook too, or, better still, married to a good cook, could make a person who ought to be proof against the worst social upheavals. . . . Can you cook, Mademoiselle Lucienne?"

I blushed scarlet, as though he had made me a formal offer of marriage.

"A little."

"You know, cooking interests me. I believe I could think out some original ideas on the subject. Yes. I shouldn't at all mind playing the part of cook-inspirer. More than once on board I've come to the chef's rescue. He lacks imagination, that's what's wrong with him. But without a perfect executant at my elbow I'm no good at all. Ah, mademoiselle, we ought to set up in partnership."

I thought: "He's joking. Now don't be silly and get

taken in by his foolery. If he loves you, he wouldn't make fun of both of us in front of the Barbelenets. There's no doubt he's merely frivolous."

But then I thought: "Would he take that tone if we were alone together? Well, perhaps he would. But even if the words were the same they would sound so different. To me, at any rate. I should see it as a playful way of proposing something infinitely serious and binding; his whole life in fact, but offered like that laugh of his. I admit that the Barbelenets don't at all affect him as they do me. Even Marie noticed that. He can even summon up the Barbelenets as witnesses to his nostalgia for mathematics. It isn't that he ignores their presence or wants to bowl them over. No, simply and with cool effrontery he makes them his, and pretends to have no idea they are anything but perfectly at their ease. If he ever got shipwrecked he's just the man, as he said himself, to offer the native chief a cigarette and forthwith begin to argue with him about predestination."

Pierre Febvre had been watching the dusty road fly past. After a moment he turned to Madame Barbelenet and said with the most innocent expression:

"I'm so glad you're here. Mademoiselle Lucienne is very hard on me. She thinks I can't be taken seriously. But we, being cousins, know how reliable the members of our family can be."

Then, turning to me:

"Well now, mademoiselle, I imagine you don't consider Madame Barbelenet a frivolous person, do you? Very well then! Madame Barbelenet will tell you that in our family we are all the same, excessively serious. It's not even a question of blood relationship, for it can be transmitted by marriage. My profession, or what is assumed to be my profession, seems to have made me rather flighty. But I can't prevent myself from really meaning everything I say. Observe: though the monastic life seems to me extremely tempting, I have never said, even after a meal, that I wanted to take orders, because if I had said so I should have meant it, and if I had meant it I should have been in great danger of doing it."

"When I tell you of my project of learning hotel management,

I am perfectly serious. I admit the idea only clearly took form five minutes ago. But I must have been brooding over it for a long time already.

"And when I suggest our going into partnership together, though I may be behaving with the utmost indiscretion, I am as sincere as if I said I considered you pretty, or that the vehicle we are now in is going at moderate speed. Absolutely. Madame Barbelenet is frowning at me, to indicate that I ought to go slow. But I can't help it, I must give my impulse the reins and finish my explanation. To return to where I left off. . . . Well then, I picture myself very satisfactorily married to you, if you would have me, and our running a first-class hotel for travellers in the most interesting place we could think of. One of the main roads through Europe, say. Ah, I can picture that admirably. But please don't think I insist on the hotel as part of the bargain. We could try something else, if you preferred."

What I chiefly remember of this moment is the feeling that not my confusion nor my somewhat intoxicated happiness dominated the situation, but again, my astonishment. It was from that moment I began to lose many of my conventional reactions to what was, and was not possible in polite society. Formerly I had believed that when a number of persons of this or that class came together, there were strict limits to what could be said or done by them, and that there were certain rules which it was almost physically impossible to overstep. When seven or eight people meet in a small middle-class drawing-room, we know beforehand, if not everything that is going to be said, at least everything that cannot possibly be said or done. It is almost as if even one glaring breach in language or deportment would bring down the walls, or at least scatter the assembly to the four winds. The mere thought of such a breach terrifies even the boldest. We all, with everything in us, bow to convention, even as the parts of our bodies obey the laws of gravity, and with the same compulsion.

Seeing the two Barbelenet ladies, Pierre Febvre and myself all in our Sunday best, rattling along the road to a church which was a place of pilgrimage too, one might have concluded that the situation did not offer either of us much chance of freedom

either in speech or behaviour, But I was discovering that it was far from being so.

It seemed to me remarkable that Pierre Febvre could summon up the power to be so astoundingly incorrect. But what bordered on the miraculous was that no one seemed in the least shocked by his words. How was it that the enormities he uttered could seem so natural to all of us?

Madame Barbelenet, after having very slightly contracted her brows, now raised them little by little. At the same time she had thrown back her head. She seemed to be wanting to increase somewhat her distance from Pierre Febvre, but one could not tell whether it was meant to indicate her disapproval of him, or merely that she wanted to study him more carefully. Cécile, on the contrary, had leant forward.

After which, Madame Barbelenet proceeded earnestly to scrutinize me, rather as one might seek the traces of a bruise upon a face. Cécile, too, bent her gaze on me, but her quarrel was with my eyes. Her thoughts seemed to have retreated to the farthest depths of the grey-green eyes, where, crouching, they made ready to spring full upon me.

At last Madame Barbelenet spoke :

"Heaven be praised, you cannot often have heard such a speech as our cousin has just seen fit to make you. I nearly said 'my nephew,' given his age, and seeing that his mother was a real sister to me in the old days. On two separate occasions, I spent a whole month of my holidays with her, when I was a girl, on the superb estate that my uncle, Judge le Mesnil, had in the Drôme country. It is his portrait you have seen hanging in the drawing-room over the piano. My uncle, the Judge, was at that time, my dear Pierre, your mother's guardian. Probably you are not aware that it was there, on the Judge's estate, at a small shooting party for the opening of the season, that we first met the young man who was later to propose to your mother. Yes. And I do not see why I should not add that your father even seemed in doubt for a time as to whether he should pay court to your mother or to me. I congratulate him, in any case, on having finally made so wise a choice."

"I believe I once heard my mother say something about it."

"Indeed, you saw so little of your mother after you grew up? First college, then your occupation. Our cousin's mother," she added, turning to me, "died while he was away on one of his first voyages. I am sure that he has always felt the need of a mother. And you will no doubt tell me, mademoiselle, that you had already noticed it."

Whereupon she laughed very majestically, and continued:

"You never told us, my dear Pierre, how your father is and if he still loves shooting as much as ever. For you might say, mademoiselle, that shooting has filled an unusually important part in the life of our cousin's father. Really, all said and done, it was while shooting that he found a wife, and I sometimes wonder whether it may not have been shooting that made him a widower."

"Oh?"

"Why, yes, my dear Pierre. That year, your parents spent an extra week in the country at the end of the season, and a very damp part of the country too, and notwithstanding the very bad state of health your mother was in already. And all because of a shoot the gentlemen were arranging."

"But you know of course that my mother had been very ill the year before?"

"All the more reason why they should have been more careful, my dear boy. Men are often so selfish. I think all girls should be familiar with that fact, it would save them such a lot of disappointment later. Yes, entirely wrapped up in themselves, always ready to imagine everything is all right so long as they're pleased with what they're doing."

She sighed.

"Do you suppose, my dear Pierre, that your mother could have held out as long as I have, if she had had to live where I do?"

But we were coming into Notre Dame d'Echauffour, down a long gentle slope.

The louder quicker hoof-beats, the wheels singing against the brakes like a knife-grinder's wheel, the sunlight bursting generously through picturesque banks of cloud, the warm air, the penetrating smell of the soil, the increasing proximity of

houses, the feeling of arriving, all these things produced in me a sudden intoxication, which my soul, no doubt, had other reasons also for welcoming.

My thoughts seemed to grow lighter. They rose into the air, humming like bees. No longer did I desire to keep them linked together. It was all one to me whether they were relevant to each other. Prevision, memory, took on aspects for me so unfamiliar that I did not recognize them any more. I began thinking of a carter trudging along a road beside his horses at early morning. He has had a drink of white wine. He is walking between two lines of poplars that are still leafless but are beginning to turn green. He is not thinking of anything ; but a hundred thoughts hover all around him that are all the sweeter for not being his. All he has is the shadow and the gleam of those hundreds of thoughts that drift over him, puffed out and buoyant like the clouds I see above me, far more precious for not being his thoughts, as if the road and wine had made them universal.

I thought : " There is nothing better than this. All other joys in comparison seem fraught with a mysterious curse. They reek of fever and of blood. They reek of toil and slavery. They all, those others, in some way intimidate us, as though they had some grudge against us. Even love I would beg to etherealize itself, so that it might float level with this ecstasy. If instead, love demands more, I shall not listen to it. Warm sun, humming wheels, smell of earth, clustering roofs ! Let love itself accept the casual proximity of all these exquisite existences, raising them all, in its soul's joy, to the level of the universal clouds."

XIV

MARTHE had said to me : " If you would like to tidy up a little, come to my room."

After all those hours on the road, I was obviously ready for it. So were the others, seeing that we had all, as a matter of fact, been travelling. Everyone was busy in separate rooms. The servant was preparing the meal, and I think Cécile had just joined her in the kitchen. We therefore went up to the first floor without anyone noticing us.

Marthe closed the door and latched it. " Now you won't be disturbed." Then she added, but not very enthusiastically : " Perhaps you would rather be alone."

" Not at all. You're not a bit in my way. I'm just going to wash my hands and run a comb through my hair."

I gave only the most cursory glance to the arrangement of the room. I did not know if she was proud of it or, on the contrary, a little ashamed. Where she was concerned, either alternative was possible. So, with my back to the room, I said : " You have made it very charming in here."

But all the same I had had time to see a bedspread, entirely made by hand, and simply bloated with all the hours of dreary toil it had cost its maker behind those cinder-specked window-panes. I had had time to breathe in an atmosphere of domesticity so depressing that I could not help suddenly picturing myself in brilliant startling clothes, every movement scattering perfume, sitting in the sensual laughter and light my own bare shoulders shed about me, among the opulent furnishings of some restaurant at night.

I went to the dressing-table. It was a pleasure to see a mirror again. The last I had had a chance of using was in the dining-room where we lunched at F——-les-Eaux, a narrow strip too far from the table, in which I could just catch glimpses of myself.

To plunge my eyes thus into Marthe's mirror was as exquisite a pleasure as a glass of fresh water must be to the parched traveller. It was a real thirst I felt. I kept repeating to myself, with determination, almost with fury : " I am beautiful, I tell you. I tell you, I am a beautiful and desirable woman. I could have bare shoulders, make up, ornaments in my hair, a litter of odds and ends around me, and the savours of an elegant table. I am not made to embroider a counterpane in eighteen months. I loathe this room, loathe this odour of domesticity, like a stale whiff from a cupboard."

And as I put some powder on my face—not enough, not as much as I wanted—I thought : " If Pierre came in suddenly now, I believe I should offer him my lips, right in front of this Barbelenet girl." And I bit my lip.

Marthe had come quite close to me. Her eyes, in the mirror, looked at me, and sought to make contact with my own with so much persistence, and so agitatedly, that finally I paid attention. " Why, what is it, Marthe ? "

She came still nearer, put her hand on the edge of the table and bent her head.

" You won't be coming here any more, Mademoiselle Lucienne ? "

" Why not ? What do you mean ? "

She retreated a step, turning away her head.

" You won't be giving us any more lessons, will you ? "

" I really haven't the least idea what you mean ? "

" I mean . . . when you leave these parts altogether."

" When I leave these parts altogether ? "

" Why, naturally——"

She sat down in an armchair with her chin in her hands :

" Yes . . . when you are married."

" Married ? "

" Oh ! how wrong you are not to trust me. I think it is quite right. You don't think I am so stupid as to compare myself with you."

" But, my dear little Marthe, I assure you I don't know what you are talking about."

" Cécile thinks I shall hate you. That would console her. I think she's almost as stupid as she's wicked. . . . No, on

the contrary, I wish you not even a moment's unhappiness. If I'd been allowed to go with you to Notre Dame d'Echauffour to-day, I'd have said a prayer for you . . . for you, not for him, no, not for him."

"Marthe dear!"

"All the same, it's pretty miserable that life should be like that. It wasn't difficult for him to get you to believe in him . . . no more than it was me. But if I hadn't found an opportunity to speak to you this evening, would you even have paid any attention to me, or realized how I feel?"

"I realize much more than you think, Marthe."

"Pooh! You would have forgotten me just as quickly as any of your pupils. And it's not right, because there's not one of them, perhaps, who would have done, for your sake——"

Her voice trembled, she seemed near sobs.

"Marthe, that's foolish of you. You are a dear little thing, my own dear little sister. I shall never forget you. And I shan't give you up, either."

She let me put my arms round her, looked at me, hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Do you think I have any talent for the piano?"

I couldn't help saying:

"Certainly, Marthe, quite a lot of talent . . . why do you ask?"

"Oh, just so."

She was silent again, thinking.

"You'll go to Marseilles, won't you?"

"Marseilles?"

"Yes . . . I mean . . . then. I don't see what else. . . . But you'll very often be alone. . . . I should think it would help you to pass the time a bit if you went on giving lessons . . . to someone. . . . Really, you haven't had a proper chance to judge me. I could work ever so much harder."

Her eyes were shining. I felt myself yielding on all sides to the torrential rush of her emotion.

"Marthe, Marthe! You know it seems to me we are just talking nonsense. You speak as though things had already happened . . . things there has so far been no question of."

I opened the door.

"They must be waiting for us downstairs."

She seemed reluctant to leave the room. It was easy to see she attached no importance at all to my recent protestations.

"But still, tell me . . . you won't say no?"

"How stubborn you are, Marthe dear; and about pure phantasies too. . . . But . . . I won't say no."

I had M. Barbelenet on my left and Madame Barbelenet facing me. Pierre Febvre was on her right and Cécile and Marthe at each end of the table, Cécile sitting between Pierre and her father, and Marthe between her mother and myself.

The table had been laid very carefully. A certain solemnity was in the air. In the past there had been times when we had all six been together in the drawing-room, but never had we met thus at table. This dinner was something that was taking place for the very first time, and it was my presence made it so unique. The most vulnerable point of the party then was centred in my own being, to which, very naturally, what embarrassment there was would flow. This discomfort would have seemed to me slight had there been nothing more disquieting in the gathering than the novelty of the circumstances.

As it was, the dinner oppressed me like some ceremony in which everything has a meaning. I tried to ignore it to the best of my power, and fortunately the contemplation of Madame Barbelenet offered a temporary refuge for my state of mind.

Her face was opposite mine, and spontaneously my eyes were always seeking it out. But actually there was more to it than that. Her face positively claimed my attention, dragged it to her, and bowed it before her: as a piece of work to be done, a plot of land to be dug, or timber to be cut engrosses the labourer and drags him back to the job, however tired he may be. Between the features of that face and my own attention, some urgent compact seemed being made. Particularly my attention was concentrated on the furrows that separated her cheeks and jowl, and the other furrow separating her chin from its fat counterpart below. And then I was stopped by the wart. My eyes went all over it. With a sort of exasperation I contemplated that granular surface, the almost pink circumference

of flesh at the base, and the crown of twisted greying hairs. Thence, at a bound, I leapt to the left eye ; it was as though I were hanging from that slightly swollen lid, and when it flickered as it sometimes did, I felt it was because I was hanging from it with all the weight of my stare.

Next came the ample nose, Bourbon as it is called, which evoked a sort of longing in me to bite it, and all the accompanying feelings of eating, of something solid and beneficial that the body would take pleasure in consuming, and the mere idea of which was enough almost to calm the hollow restlessness of hunger.

So vivid was it that, as in a nightmare, always held in leash, the meal seemed to be beginning with some magical rite, which cast into my empty stomach a rich helping of the very substance of Madame Barbelenet.

And it was only when I received a helping of the first real food, vermicelli soup, that I was delivered from my obsession and restored to my surroundings.

M. Barbelenet was looking round him with anxious benevolence, now at my plate or at the glasses, and now at his wife. Doubtless he was making sure the right glasses had been put out for the different wines, that I was getting all I wanted, and that his wife was satisfied with the way the ceremony was progressing. But his preoccupation with visible things was only because of the deep significance to him of what was represented by them. The dinner starting well on the white expanse of the tablecloth, there was reason to hope it might develop equally favourably on that other plane where souls confront each other. So that it was not merely accident that his eyes seemed reluctant to investigate certain regions of the table.

Marthe and Cécile, though facing each other, did not exchange a glance. Marthe drooping, sat up, with her eyes on her plate, her delicate bluish-white hand playing with the knife-rest. Cécile was bolt upright, but her eyes reached no farther than the middle of the table. She seemed fairly oblivious to what was going on, or at any rate only inclined to be present as by the merest afterthought.

I should have been amused by Pierre Febvre if the depth and diversity of my feelings for him had permitted it. His face

would suddenly overflow with all those rippling puckers that were so characteristic of his smile ; everything being present except the smile itself. His usual ease in fitting into situations and getting what pleasure was to be extracted from them was not quite so much in evidence. The gusto necessary to offer cigarettes to native chiefs was being damped down by the irritation of being forced to repeat it once too often, just when one would so much rather be elsewhere. From time to time he glanced rapidly at me as though we were confederates or comrades or shipwrecked together. And rapidly he inspected old Barbelenet ; with the sort of look, I imagine, one might have for a deckhand, when about to ask him to do something slightly beyond his powers, before deciding not to. As for Madame Barbelenet, who blocked out all his horizon to the left, his stealthy sidelong glances seemed to say " Yes, over there things are more serious."

Madame Barbelenet threw her head back slightly and turned towards Pierre Febvre. Her right hand lay along her fork her left along a tube of some patent medicine, slanting on the table like those marble rods which sometimes support the hands of statues. And her left eyelid began to tremble, as though the difficult words were almost to issue from that very place. " My dear Febvre, I wonder whether, by chance, you asked your father whether the season has been a good one in the South ? "

" Well, you know, he's nearly as bad a correspondent as I am. On the whole we know very little of what is happening to each other. I suppose he goes on having his aches and pains because it's just the time for them ; and I don't think he can be shooting, because it's the close season ; unless of course he's persuaded the mayor to get up a party."

" Still, there are certain serious steps in life which no one can take without consulting a father."

" Oh, do you think so ? Well, yes. . . that's true enough . . . Would you call it a serious step to exchange out of a line that goes to Senegal into one that crosses to America ? Would you ? "

"That must depend."

"I ask you, because when I decided to change companies last year I completely forgot to let my father know. Talk about forgetting! The first he knew of it was getting a postcard from me from New York. Why, it was only when I was putting the card in the pillar-box that I realized how forgetful I had been. But please note that it wasn't a matter of any practical significance at all, for my father's always at least sixty degrees of longitude out of reckoning when it comes to my affairs. I know he wouldn't have made the slightest objection, but still I agree that certain formalities should be observed."

"But there are, as you very well know, certain steps that need even more serious consideration than a change of companies."

"Especially at our cousin Pierre's age," said M. Barbelenet. "I have no doubt at all that considering my age and the habits I've got into, if I had to change companies I should find it pretty disturbing. But when I was your age I should have thought nothing of going from the *Est* to the *Nord* or from the *Orleans* line to the *P.L.M.*"

Old Barbelenet's remark was not as empty-headed as it seemed. He had sensed the desire, more or less, in all of us, to avoid being brought too close to the situation, and so he came out with the first idea in his head, as a carpenter might slip a wooden wedge between the job and the vice. I imagine we were all grateful to him, particularly Madame Barbelenet, who was not by nature inclined to rush a ceremony.

A new course had time to come in and go the round of the table in the sobering presence of the servant, before Madame Barbelenet went on again.

"Well then, perhaps there would be nothing improper in my writing to him. To a certain degree, my dear Pierre, I feel that I have been responsible for you these last few months. Yes indeed! We are your only relatives in these parts. I am glad you realized as much in coming to see us from the beginning, and clearly, without us, nothing of what so closely interests you could have turned out in the same way."

Pierre Febvre frowned slightly and glanced at me. Madame Barbelenet's suggestion must have been distasteful to him.

Still he was acute enough to realize what lay beneath it, and even to see, instantly, all the probable consequences that she herself could not of course foresee. Then he smiled faintly, and I guessed that at that moment to have been able to laugh his "Ha! Ha! Ha!" would have been a mortal relief, and helped him then and there to a less depressing fashion of envisaging human destiny.

"In regard to yourself, Mademoiselle Lucienne, I do not see how, in the circumstances, anyone could act as a substitute for your mother."

I blushed as never in all my life. Never, never had I felt so small in front of anyone. I called up all the scorn I had; hastily, I tried to muster every reason for thinking Madame Barbelenet an idiot, superannuated, positively grotesque; I thought of her wart, her jowl, her fluttering eyelid, the uncle's portrait, the brass flowerpot stand, the "Dew sit down," but in vain. Her authority crushed me, inundated me, blinded me like the full flash of a searchlight. There was nothing left in me to retaliate, nothing behind which to shelter.

In the intonation of that voice I thought I detected, possibly mistakenly, shades of regret and condemnation concealed under the protective benevolence. That simple phrase so lately spoken, seemed to be purring all sorts of ironical or antagonistic reflections in regard to myself. But I bowed under it with all the feelings of a slave. There was no question in my mind as to what justification Madame Barbelenet had for feeling severe; I congratulated myself that she refrained from being more so; and my eyes, I felt, must have had in them, I hardly know what look of humble gratitude.

I was ashamed of it, for my own sake as well as Pierre's. I thought: "If only he does not scrutinize me just now. I am totally unworthy of him." And the idea that Cécile might possibly be reading from my face the utter collapse of my pride, was altogether intolerable.

How I desired to be like those who refuse to submit; those who are persecuted. "Why do I not have to defend my happiness against all the united Barbelenets of the world? What courage I should have then! What a joy it would be to hang on, resist, curl myself up! The relief it would be to have facing

you, and outside you, and, so to speak, against that part of your skin which does not touch the flesh, somebody you could frankly and unequivocally call your enemy ! ”

Madame Barbelenet added :

“ I should think that any step whatever, taken by another, as far as your mother is concerned, so long as you yourself have not told her how things stand, would be bad manners——”

Pausing a little, she went on :

“ Any wrong parents may have done their children does not invalidate the fact that a certain consideration is due to them. There are ways of indicating dutifully that a decision has been come to, without waiting to ascertain their views. That surely is sufficient reproof.”

And then, after a further silence :

“ No, I do not hold at all with the bad manners of to-day. And no one can blame a child who repays its parents' sacrifices with self-will and ingratitude more than myself. But if I had forced my daughters to win a livelihood as best they could, with no support from me, it would seem natural to me they should make their own decisions and consult my wishes merely as a matter of form ; and I should not feel jealous if they turned to some other family for the care and protection they had not found in me. Don't you agree, Pierre ? ”

At that moment my attention, I cannot tell why, was diverted to the taste of what I was eating. I realized that there was a slice of meat on my plate, and that a magnificent leg of mutton occupied the centre of the table. I tell myself I have the right to be aware of it without any disrespect to my dearest thoughts ; for Pierre Febvre's paeon in honour of the Barbelenet cooking—cooking profoundly significant—is mingled in my memory with the first stirrings of my love.

And suddenly there rose before me, as it were, an entire resumé of living : vast, welcoming and elaborate as a cathedral. The taste of the joint, the Barbelenet family, my adventure, the sublimity of my emotions, all fell into place with a strange ease. There rose before me the picture of a universe, coppery and dark as blood—through which a concentrated nourishment circulated—which to our obedience to our destiny gave its savour, and in which love and beauty dug deep into that tight

soil of which the flesh of the Barbelenets formed part, as did the maternal wart ; and in which the divinest thoughts could spring from a crowd of assembled Barbelenets and some wine, which the most unpretentious of them all was at that moment pouring out for me.

Towards the end of the dinner, Cécile had left the room on some pretext or other. Marthe had looked after her, and then resumed her accustomed calm attitude, so like a convalescent. We went on talking.

Gradually, the elder sister's absence became for me, first anxiety, then anguish, and finally, quite intolerable. As though a pin-prick, at first imperceptible, were gradually growing and gaping wide and wider, until it assumed the dimensions of an abyss.

I wanted to cry out aloud : " What can Cécile be doing ? " I tried hard to think of her in the kitchen, giving an order to the servant about the coffee, or helping to set the cups out on the tray ; or in her room, arranging her hair. But it was impossible. Something always pushed off the picture, as when we try to force ourselves to dream : no amount of invoking, suggesting, elaborating will bring it to pass ; but instead, some awful nightmare comes to life complete in every detail.

Then my heart began to throb, and the skin of my temples tightened. I kept on repeating, but without conviction : " The meal has been too much of an effort. A great drain on the emotions. Old Barbelenet's wine is going to your head."

I looked at Pierre, then at Madame Barbelenet. She was talking of relations in Paris and arguing with her husband about the exact site of the church of Saint-Roch. I all but joined in the discussion in the hope of forgetting Cécile and to give her time to reappear.

Finally my distress became physical. I was certain I must be looking pale ; that I must be looking like someone suffering from too heavy a meal ; and that I could therefore get up and go out, stammering some excuse, and that it would not seem strange to anyone.

I went into the kitchen. The maid was doing something to the coffee strainer.

"Isn't Mademoiselle Cécile here?"

"No, mademoiselle."

"You haven't seen her?"

"No, I haven't."

"Oh, good. She'll be in her room then, I expect."

"No, she's not in her room. I've just been there. I went to get these little serviettes we keep in her cupboard. Can I do anything for you, Mademoiselle Lucienne?"

"No, no, thank you. It's quite all right."

Then without further hesitation I pass through the hall and go out of the house.

Immediately night, wind, the lights of the railway.

For a second I stand looking before me, as one might look at the sky to find the Great Bear. The various signal-lamps fall into position, far off, close, farther. There is a gleam from the strip of line by which I always begin to cross.

Among all these lights, now in their right places, not one moves. I begin to step over the tracks. I follow the only direction I know. Particularly I look out for signal wires, because they are not so bright as the rails, and being higher up are more dangerous. I go straight to the great lamp-standard to which I clung that first evening when I crossed the line. Then I see that someone is standing against the shaft; someone who makes no movement, who seems to be waiting. The lamplight spreads in the dark over our heads, but it hardly illuminates this figure which merges almost into the shaft.

I try to muffle my tread on the ballast and to keep to the long lines of shadow. I get to within three tracks' distance of the unknown form, which turns out to be a woman's.

She hears me, and turns. She makes a gesture as if to hide against the standard, then as if to rush away over the tracks.

I cry out: "Cécile! Cecile!"

She hesitates. I have time to spring to her side as she stands between the tracks.

"Cécile, what are you doing here?"

The lamplight falls directly upon us, yet seems all mingled

with the darkness of night like moonlight, and leaves patches of deep shadow in Cécile's face. I am questioning a Cécile strangely transfigured.

"What are you doing here?"

She looks away, as if meditating flight. Then she looks me in the face. Her eyes are two great dark pits, her lips tremble, and the pallid light from above makes their trembling seem excessive.

"Go away. I want nothing from you."

"Cécile, I beg of you. Come back with me . . . and swear . . . but first come back."

"No."

"What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. Go away. I want nothing from anybody."

"I implore you, Cécile dear!"

"Why have you followed me here? What I do is no concern of yours. You've got what you want, haven't you? Well then?"

"How do you mean? Got what I want?"

"You've no more use for me now, have you? Then what can it matter to you if I do as I please?"

"You don't know what you're saying, Cécile. Come with me."

"I know very well what I'm saying. I'm perfectly sane. No one shall stop me doing what I mean to do. Besides, who is it going to interfere with?"

"Oh! And your parents? And all of us?"

"Pooh! It's time I thought of myself a bit."

"Cécile, Cécile dear!"

"Tell me . . . there's something I want to know . . . I can't quite make it out. Do you think Marthe is very upset?"

"Very upset?"

"Yes, by everything?"

"Really I——"

"Little beast! I bet she'll find some way of not being upset. I'm getting vulgar, you see. Aha! You didn't know I was like that, did you?"

"Cécile, you alarm me."

"Anyhow, you've got no grievance against me. You never

did care for me much. But I know I'm not popular. I'm well aware of that."

"Where do you get that idea from, Cécile? Personally, I'm very fond of you."

"That's true, you have come out to see what was happening to me. That's something! After all, you were the only one who thought of it. Eh? That little beast stuck in her chair all right. She's sipping her coffee at this moment. And what about that Pierre Febvre of yours? Ha ha!"

"Hush! I wonder you're not ashamed to talk like that."

"All right. Let's hush, then. Here's my train coming. You can clear out! You don't want to go under with me too, do you? Clear out, I tell you!"

I saw a light begin to grow, far off, at the end of the line, a light that was still minute, but which because it moved was more terrific than all the tall lamp-standards—it was like a projectile coming straight for us from the remote horizon.

And the murmur that accompanied it, though barely audible, was as terrifying to the soul as the interminable thunder of insupportable August nights.

Then I grappled with Cécile, I dragged her back, I managed to fling her against the lamp standard; and without caring whether her back would bruise against the corner of the shaft, with everything in me I hung on to the iron laths, crushing Cécile's body between the shaft and my breast.

She fought, with all the strength of her hands she tried to thrust my breast away, and her grey-green eyes darted her hate at me with a sort of despairing eagerness.

The train thundered nearer. As I had my back to it I could not convince myself it was not coming right into us. It seemed incredible it could manage to stick to its rails, that their insignificant height should suffice to direct that appalling bulk and save us by inches. Already I felt it crashing into my loins, uprooting us both, and our fragile support, like some weed. But the panic in my body only tightened my fingers more desperately round the laths.

Then with a mighty roar, a mighty prolonged concussion of the earth, came the engine, big as a house, its furnace glowing fiery red, its lights and clattering coaches . . . and the feeling

that every step that passed was the one to cut us down. . . .

Cécile spat in my face.

At last the luggage van passed too, trailing its little red lamp ; and the noise of the express sank suddenly to a weird hooting, dreary as death, but fugitive and harmless.

I let her go. I wiped the spittle from my face. I began to cry. Cécile took hold of my hands, squeezed them, and raised them to her lips. My hands were hurting.

She let them fall.

"It wasn't to thank you," she said.

I took her hands in my turn.

"Swear to me you will never do such a thing again."

She looked at my tear-filled eyes.

"All right. I swear."

"You absolutely swear ?"

"Yes . . . I absolutely swear."

Then I said to her : "What train was that ? I don't know it."

"No, because you've never been here so late. It's number 14. Only a through train. But it's fast."

"Well, we must get back, and quick, too. What must they be thinking ?"

We began to return across the tracks, Cécile carefully guiding me. She said :

"We'll go up into my room quietly. You'd better bathe your eyes a little. Perhaps I ought to put my hair straight, too."

We entered the house with every precaution. We went upstairs, trying not to make the boards creak. But my shoes squeaked once or twice and Cécile looked at me, smiling.

Her room was almost the same as Marthe's.

As we were tidying ourselves, Cécile said : "Don't you think we could be friends, perhaps, after what has happened ?"

I thought her face had never looked so young, so freed from its harshness.

"Come here, Cécile, so that I can kiss you all the same."

She received my embrace very willingly and whispered in my ear : "We're quits now, aren't we ?"

We went back to the others, who had risen and were about to pass into the drawing-room.

"Ah, there you are!" said old Barbelenet. "We were beginning to get anxious. I hope it was nothing much?"

"Mademoiselle Lucienne wasn't feeling very well," said Cécile. "I took her out for a little fresh air. Then she had a short rest in my room."

Pierre looked across at us, with the expression of the evening of our meeting with Cécile, when spelling out the name of the rue Saint-Blaise.

Madame Barbelenet looked at us too, but in such a way as to imply that without believing every word we said, she was not going to interfere in our little secrets. As for Marthe, the fact that I had been for a walk with Cécile and gone up to her room was what most mattered to her, and gave her a momentary pang.

Cécile continued :

"Father, don't you think that before we leave the dining-room, in view of the 'circumstances'"—she could not forbear emphasizing the word with a faint sneer—"we might have a bottle of champagne from the lot you got in last year?"

"That's a capital idea," said old Barbelenet, only too pleased to show off the resources of his wine-cellar. "I'll send the servant to get it."

"But, Papa, why not send Marthe. The maid is busy taking the coffee into the drawing-room. Marthe knows quite well where it is. Besides, she'll enjoy going, won't you, Marthe?"

Marthe made no demur, but as she got up she looked at me with some reproach, as if I was implicated to some extent in what her sister said.

But before she got through the door, Cécile had managed to find time to add :

"It will make Marthe so happy to be the one to bring up the champagne we are going to drink . . . in honour of the impending engagement of Mademoiselle Lucienne and our cousin Pierre . . . for that's rather how it is, I imagine——"

II

THE BODY'S RAPTURE

I

MY name is Pierre Febvre. I am thirty-four. Like many men after the war, I lead a very active life without quite knowing how it is I seem to have less leisure than before, or whether everything considered, I really am doing more. The writing of this book is not therefore a means of killing time. Neither is it inspired by belated literary ambitions.

But the deeper I go, the more convinced I become that a number of events which intimately concerned me, at a particular period of my life, are deeply significant ; even though they relate to the most usual circumstances of any man's life. Not that I think there is any likelihood of my forgetting them ; yet even if there were, another being exists who lived them as intimately—possibly more so even—to whose memories I could have recourse. I know that for years now, we have hardly, so to speak, mentioned them. But by some allusion from time to time, we remind each other that they are still fresh in our souls. And there we remain. This is not the time to inquire into the significance of our mutual reserve.

But the problem before me is not that of rescuing these events from oblivion. Nor is it my concern to transmit, or even establish them, in the usual sense of those words. What I do want, however, is to see them in their totality, in order to know once and for all how I stand in regard to them.

I said they seemed important to me. And it is not because they once formed part of my own past, or because they once moved me, that I thus speak of them. The words I use are not used lightly. I am perfectly aware, for instance, that the recollection of a garden seat, upon which some man once sat for half an hour ten years ago, can take on an extraordinary importance in that man's eyes, so that every time he thinks of it he is more deeply moved. Thoughts that seem sublime well

up in him and in the algebra of his mind at last come to represent infinity. And I am aware too, that in literature the talent of a writer is often a matter of stimulating the reader to work out similar equations.

But the point of view I take is a different one. I do not deny that the events in question derive their importance from the fact that they concern me. Nevertheless, I believe there is another reason also.

For the moment I sense it more clearly than I can find words for it, but my need, precisely, is to find such words.

My impression of it at this moment is as follows : If I could succeed in getting clear for myself the full significance of those events in a way that would do justice to them, it might perhaps prove to be the most important thing that had ever happened to me, and, in addition, be an immense gain in itself ; by which I mean, be as valid for another as for myself. But only if truly interpreted. And only if deeper investigation reveals the riches that to me seem present in them.

I have never been much of a thinker, nor in any way profound. Indeed, others have often considered me, as I have myself, rather frivolous, limited even ; " one of those delightful Frenchmen, utterly untouched by any metaphysical neurosis," as was said with a grimace by some lady on a great liner, who thought she was no longer of an age when " delightful Frenchmen could appeal to her." But such a lack of seriousness is superficial from every aspect, as is also the protection it appears to give. As a varnish it can stand most ordinary accidents, but if somehow it gets cracked, there is nothing to protect what is beneath. I have had charming companions, whom, so it was thought, nothing could take in ; who would shrug their shoulders whenever the conversation took a serious turn, or say of some fairly serious writer, " What a bore." Yet some blow of fate which would have left me indifferent has completely smashed them up. Their varnish was particularly brittle and their " relation to existence "—the mere suggestion of which would have made them roar with laughter—as vulnerable as an " Indian " liver.

But under my varnish there lay sheltered, in spite of everything, a less vulnerable organism. Yet it is not intact. For years, my "relation to existence" has been makeshift and "out of order." And however much of an opportunist a man may be, he can only be really at peace with all things, when, whatever he may think to the contrary, his relation to the universe is harmonious and in good working order. For years I put off making the necessary adjustments. I knew well it would be possible only when the facts in question had ceased to trouble me. And that would happen, not when I had forgotten them—they were apparently unforgettable—but when I had got to the bottom of them, when I had forced them to produce their maximum effect upon me.

There you have the reason why I take up the pen to-day. It seems to me the labour of writing must have an efficacy denied to simple reflection. It is, to my mind, somewhat analogous to what happens in industry, when a research laboratory is added to already existing workshops. These shops accumulate day by day the most valuable experience, but it remains chaotic, unformulated and difficult to generalize from. The laboratory even when it discovers nothing new, and is satisfied to go over material already collected, is already functioning valuably by its very deliberation and scrutiny, and the resistances it introduces into the mere accumulation of facts.

And it is upon resistances of this kind that I am relying to help me to put into writing the events, which, till this moment were lived and meditated upon only as hazard determined.

Unfortunately, I am almost completely without any experience of writing. Even were it not so, I should still be much embarrassed to find a type of writing to which to approximate.

I am not writing to be read. I mean that primarily such a possibility leaves me indifferent, and even that, by ignoring it I am left with a freer hand.

It is not therefore necessary for me to take any novelist as my model, even though the events that interest me are such as might tempt one. A novelist seeks to please his public. I

he rises superior to that consideration, it is in order to concentrate on his art. Events are not of prime importance in his creation. I imagine he would not scruple to modify them should the construction of his novel need it, nor to cut out repetitions to obtain a more striking effect, nor simply to improve his style. Not to mention cases where the events are pure invention. Besides, the novelist tells his story for the sake of telling it. That is his occupation. I hasten to add that I am a poor judge of the way a book is written. I read practically no novels, and there are hardly any that succeed in keeping me interested to the end.

In some respects this book of mine might approximate to the tone of a scientific memoir. In such a form I feel less embarrassment in dealing with a subject about which I do know something. But the author of a memoir has a thesis to expose. What he wishes to demonstrate is clearly set out in his mind at the moment of taking up the pen. And he does not feel, as he proceeds, called on to present his facts in the order in which he first became aware of them (from the very first observations and experiments, however fragmentary or unsuccessful). He regroups them so as to make them bear favourably on his thesis. In fact, the real work was done first for himself; and all we shall ever know of it is merely what he pleases. His "memoir" is nothing but a demonstration, at times even a polemic in disguise, for the world outside.

But as for me, I have no answer already present to my spirit. If I had, I should feel no further obligation. My real undertaking commences at this very moment.

Nor is it my wish to convince anyone of anything. I have therefore no intention of providing elaborate proofs with which to force conviction on another. If it should seem necessary to emphasize an event, either by discussing it or commenting upon it, I shall do so for my own benefit and to see it in a clearer light.

In short, I mean not to be my own dupe. The happenings in question, by their nature and the way they struck me then, and my present capacity for gauging them never could assume, honestly, either the uniform or the parade step that are inevitable in any scientific memoir. And if, at all costs, I made them

submit to it, it would be purely meaningless. I am not trying to ape the scientist when I forgo the role of novelist.

When I search for a word that will crystallize my thoughts, I tell myself that I would like to draw up something analogous to a "searching report." But that is, of course, easy enough to say.

I have a weakness for reports. Not for such as I myself drew up when I was a purser in the merchant marine. The matters I had to deal with lacked substance somewhat. (As, for example, how best apportion your purchases of non-perishable foodstuffs in Marseilles and New York at different seasons of the year.)

But at times I find myself reading for pleasure the reports that fall into my hands. Anybody sitting beside me in a train or omnibus, would see me plunged deep in some financial journal with a concentration that would seem a sufficient comment on the state of my finances. Actually I would be reading the report of a general meeting on the fictitious prosperity of some rubber company. I would go into all the details for the love of the thing. But in such reports the proportion of fiction is what spoils my pleasure in them. To my mind, reports are in a category whose particular quality results from the honesty with which facts are stated. Even when this special quality is most successfully imitated, something assures us that it is not the real thing. The pleasure experienced by the shareholders remains unalloyed only so long as they do not see through it.

One of my pleasantest memories in this category is a police report which an old friend, a magistrate in Marseilles, lent me together with the other documents in the case. It was clearly a masterpiece. You could see that every element of every circumstance had been rigorously noted, and that this functionary, whose mind was naturally unbiassed, had found deep gratification in supplying an irreproachably exact transfer of the facts, without in any way concerning himself with any conclusions which those whom it concerned might draw from them.

But if I imagine a similar sort of mind at grips with the events which interest me so personally, I have to imagine it

returning empty handed, or all but. For, except towards the end, nothing could have appeared more ordinary. My police functionary would have wondered : "What do they want me to sort out from this ? Similar things are happening every day all round us. A report on this subject ? Why, three lines would suffice." This is the reason I mentioned the "searching report."

I may add that I have a great fondness for certain accounts of voyages. That conjures up for me certain models in this form, certain extremely conscientious records of explorations which do not seek at all to impress the reader, do not seem even to be addressed to him, or under any obligation to relate from beginning to end every prodigious adventure. Instead, they testify to all they have seen with such hearty good faith that the fording of a river, the crossing of a mountain ridge become interesting and illuminating. A phrase comes into my mind almost integrally. "During the forty-three days of our march, it did not rain neither by day nor night, nor did we perceive any trace of dew. Yet the earth seemed in no wise to have suffered drought, and practically no day passed but we came upon a spring." That is the tone I like. I do not know if it could be adhered to for long in a subject such as mine. Even now, in accounts of voyages, it has become rare enough. Much too many of these productions, even when signed by famous explorers, are insufferably ingenuous with their affectation of cool-headedness and blustering heartiness, their pedantic heroics, their stunt epics for New York bank clerks.

Briefly, the important thing is to start off. Difficulties will crop up as I go, and, it may be, suggest their own solutions, possibly ?

One, it is true, at once arrests me :

"Where begin ?" I mean. "At what moment and how ?"

When I declare that "within my own experience certain important events have taken place, and, since I lack leisure, these are all I shall deal with," the impression I get is that I

understand perfectly what it is I am saying and that no misunderstanding is possible. But when I think about it, I realize it is not so simple.

The events which come first and most prominently to my mind, began roughly to occur from about the third month of my marriage. And it was to them I referred when I said that if I could succeed in getting them clear, it might perhaps be the most important gain I had ever made. But they did not begin suddenly. They came, little by little, to stand out from the most ordinary circumstances ; so ordinary, that such a man as myself, for whom the story he tells is not merely a pastime, hesitates to refer to them.

The point at which I should start seemed very obvious, when I thought about it vaguely. And it is only since I have been trying to concentrate on it that it escapes me. The effort is analogous to what happens in dreams when we imagine we see, term by term, whole columns of equations, but the moment we force ourselves to read them, they melt away into nothingness under our very eyes.

But the cause in this instance is not the fundamental unsubstantiality of the object. If my starting point evades me, it is no doubt to draw me deeper into the past, force me to grasp it at a point nearer its source, while the significance of the principle events—those at the apex of the curve—far from melting away, seems instead to spread ever wider and climb higher, until it reaches the very essence of the curve.

After all, it is for myself I labour. I have no account to render to anyone. My enterprise will be fully justified if sooner or later, it gives me that satisfaction of spirit which I expect from it. The risk of going too far out of my way is hardly worth bothering about if I succeed.

II

AS I relate this story, it will be seen that the part I play in it falls under two heads ; that of actor in, and witness of the events described, and also that of author of the narration. My personal equation will of course play a large part, at times unconsciously. It is therefore not unimportant to inquire somewhat into the kind of man I am.

This would be equivalent to filling up a form. But I should want to know what sort of form. It is not my intention to draw my own portrait, nor pose complacently in front of a mirror. I do not want to go beyond such particulars as can be useful. What am I to go by ?

It seems to me it will be simpler if I put what I have to say in the present tense ; I am like this, I have this or that peculiarity. . . . By which is not to be understood that such traits seem to me particularly true at this moment. On the contrary. I am convinced that time and the events I shall subsequently relate have modified some of them.

But it is a way of saying that I consider them, justifiably or not, as natural and fundamental to my character. (Thus if they have shifted, it was not without resistance.)

Geographically, I have links with the Midi (the Rhône Valley), Brittany, the North East and Paris ; Brittany having been, however, not an origin but an environment. The stock I spring from is obviously mixed, with Southern elements predominating (dark with black eyes). The man who most nearly resembled me physically was a Swiss from the Canton of Tessin, a passenger in one of the ships I served on. An exception, by the way, for when later I passed through Tessin, I saw no one of the type. Actually, I do feel Southern, but not as Northerners understand that word.

Socially, we come from the lower-middle and middle classes, with more abundant ramifications among the middle classes. My father was in the marine insurance business, as was a maternal great uncle also. One of my father's brothers was managing clerk to a solicitor, one of my mother's brothers a chemist. The rest of the family included clerks, public servants, a judge, and, more remotely, peasants. None were merchants in an actual sense, with shops, unless the chemist be excepted. And to my knowledge there was no great wealth, unless you take into account the exceedingly comfortable circumstances of the judge, a very remote relative, whom the fact of having been my mother's guardian brought nearer. No striking successes. No utter destitution. Two cloistered nuns. No one in penal settlements, or in prisons, or mad-houses, that is unless no one told me.

I had a solid education, but it has been of little use to me socially. After matriculating I continued my studies up to the Polytechnic entrance examination standard, and beyond. I passed, though they were not obligatory, in the following subjects: mathematics, astrophysics, higher mathematics, physical chemistry. Circumstances of a family nature made me give up the Polytechnic, but I encouraged them. That militarist-cum-industrialist forcing house meant nothing to me. I hoped always to be able to specialize in pure science. But all said and done, it was the hotel business I got into.

There is a frustration there which I do not hide from myself, and which demands some explanation. No doubt the very circumstances which determined my giving up the Polytechnic militated even more strongly against pure science, which provides so inadequately and so tardily for its devotees. But no real vocation can be side tracked by so little. No, it cannot have been the prospect of a few difficult years that frightened me (even though my unconscious may have yearned for an untrammelled existence).¹

What I allowed to weigh even more heavily upon me were the difficulties in which I saw my family. But most of all, it was hard for me to turn my keenness for pure science into enthusiasm for a scientific career. I realized, as I got nearer

¹More exactly an existence free from money preoccupations.

to it, that if, when necessary, it can find employment for the highest intellectual qualities, it also demands that totally different qualities shall also be present ; as for instance, the respect for hierarchies, patient and sly opportunism, and hatred of the unforeseen. In short, the bovine and civil-servant spirits combined. I do not think I should have been capable of wholeheartedly working the five-hundred square yards of the ordinary scientific concession. I should not have known how to extinguish in myself that spirit of curiosity which, if it be the source of all sciences, is yet no less inappropriate in an approved scientist, than the spirit of the catacombs would be in a Roman prelate.

That much said, I agree that a more determined nature would have achieved its object. Without lacking will, my temperament is not as energetic, nor yet as constant as that of some. I always allow too much room for present pleasure in planning out future activities.

On the other hand, I am not aware of any grave intellectual blemish in myself. In my youth I had a tendency to rush to conclusions, an exaggerated confidence in my natural gifts, possibly also too much liking for the clear light of irony. But it has all worn away, except as regards the last item, which I still have to keep in check. Stated differently, in Voltaire's day I should have rejoiced to be Voltairean. And even to-day, Voltaire for me remains a most likeable fellow. His deficiencies (bias, ignorance, frivolity) cannot make me prefer the pathetic messes who swarm all about us.

In spite of a normal Catholic education, I have not much religious bent. Not that I am closed to religion exactly, nor to the emotions it calls up. I should have made as good a believer as my neighbour in an age where faith fell naturally into place with other human conceptions—or even bound them together by filling up the interstices. But it has always been very difficult for me to imagine the state of mind of a modern educated believer. My own ideas, wherever they may have come from, tend to relate themselves to each other, and so make for opposition. I have not the gift of parking them. It would annoy me to do so. Any conception which appeals to me and which I adopt, is like an English citizen ; it has every

possible right, or nearly all, and entire liberty of action ; but it need count on no special protection from the Government. Now, I do not see how, without some special protection, traditional beliefs can continue to exist in the minds of the educated men of to-day. By protection, I mean either parking them in order to avoid all contact, or getting round their opposition by endowing them with crushing privileges.

On the other hand, as I am naturally cheerful, energetic and with rapid responses, my periods of nervous depression do not last long. I am not, like others, perpetually looking for some tonic. Even at 5 p.m., and two miles off shore, I have never felt the need for opium, nor held the barman up to ransom for a huge cocktail order. I have not, therefore, caught that sagging of the mind, charming enough, which I have seen take possession of the minds of certain of even my most distinguished colleagues, which, for me, compares with the acquired toleration of certain husbands, who, having lost the power to be jealous, make jokes about their situation.

Nor do my thoughts particularly absorb me. Of course, at times it does happen that I sink deep in thought. The long periods of leisure in my work are an invitation to do so. But in such reveries there is always a profusion of clear ideas, or ideas almost on the point of becoming so, and a relatively small proportion of confused or unsubstantial images. In my reading it is not the imaginary happenings that principally interest me. Many novelists bore me with their inventions. I prefer works of pure documentation, or authors whose sense of reality is more biting than one's own, as for example certain poets in prose or verse. In fact, as worthy souls have a habit of saying, my nature is most "positive." It is the existence of objects that has always seemed to me the strangest thing about them. As for actual events, it is not when they seem to have been cunningly contrived that they most affect me, but rather when, at every moment, they go counter to our way of conceiving them ; when they plot a curve which could never have been imagined beforehand, or prolonged thereafter. Which comes back to saying possibly, though on a different plane, that although I did a good deal of mathematics, I am at heart a physicist and not a mathematician. If at heart you happen to

be a mathematician, what will enrapture your soul, what will overwhelm you with palpitating gratitude, inform all your being with hymns of praise, is the sudden perception that some real event is in strict harmony with an equation which means a lot to you (or to imagine you perceive it, thanks to a slight mist over the eyes). A man who is at heart a physicist however, only begins to be really interested when reality stops working ; it would not take much then to make him begin prodding at it to encourage it to start again. It is this difference in temperament which, for my own purposes, I take as the equivalent to the well-known antagonism between God and Devil.

I have already risked describing my tastes in literature, and to complete my description as far as secondary features are concerned (secondary in type), there remains to be said, primarily, that I have a passion for music. I feel in a sense familiar with it and even that I know a good deal about it. I think I should have established a similar sort of familiarity with architecture had I had time. For art, speaking generally, I have a very great respect. I should say, have come to have by degrees, for as a student, I had an almost comic contempt for everything that was not the solving of equations of postulates in experimental science. Intellectually, there is very little that repels me on principle. Still, there are things, though the reason may be difficult to define. Thus, without exception, sculpture leaves me cold. There was even a time when the sight of a statue, or more particularly of a group, made me feel almost ill. Similarly, though the majority of the sciences thrill me the moment I get near them—to such a point in fact, that I have to fight against the temptation of plunging into them, one after the other—there are three or four which I find fundamentally as antipathetic as any individual ; as, for instance, pure arithmetic, my relations with which resolved themselves into the absolute minimum necessary ; and others like mineralogy and civil law, both of which I carefully avoided after my first encounter with them. There was also that other science which I pursued for some time, as though in order to have better reasons for my disgust with it, from which later I escaped as if from a man discovered to be a sadist or ritual assassin : I mean that branch of philosophy whose exact name I have

forgotten, which without any reference to reality treats metaphysical questions as pure algebraic problems.

A doctor, a shipmate, to whom I was one day citing my antipathy to sculpture, opined that so singular an attitude must have a sexual source. I read, too, some time ago, that no description of a man could be considered complete, or even adequate, in which the characteristics and past record of his sexual life remained unknown. I presume that the importance attributed to descriptive details of this kind is to some extent due to present fashion. This fashion, which is fairly recent among us, has in other countries lost its bloom. Among my memories of life on board, English conversations about the Libido antedate even the installation of turbines. At the time I lent but half an ear, as if to paradoxes that were slightly crazy. Nowadays, if I were to go to sea again, I should, on the contrary, affect to treat it as something out of date, to keep up my prestige.

But just now I am not posing for anyone, and as I notice a possible hiatus, my duty is to try and avoid it. I should with the same degree of goodwill set down the blood pressure in my arteries or my degree of gastric acidity. But the facts which I wish to throw light on have no perceptible links with such findings. Whereas, owing to their sources and their nature, they assuredly link up with my sexual life.

It becomes evident to me though, that there is but little to set down, for as far as that goes I was the most ordinary child and adolescent. In these periods of my life, I rediscover the dirt, the salacity, obsessions and wildnesses that everybody who honestly looks into his past will also find. I do not often think back to them, and then not with enthusiasm. But I have never forgotten them. Neither have I forgotten the place they filled in the conversations with my schoolmates, which has always preserved me from the dispiriting thought of being an exception. Honesty of memory would not seem to be very usual if one went by certain authors, or by the disgusted astonishment that studies in infantile sexuality have called forth in so many. So general a forgetting is a response, it would appear, to the desire to suppress shameful memories and to retain one's self-esteem. Possibly. I attribute a still simpler cause to it.

The average man, when he becomes adult, acquires higgledy-piggledy the ideas which are current in the world of adults, just as he assumes its fashions in clothes and usages. In the parcel he finds a conception of infancy which is highly conventional and borrowed from moral books and in no wise from everybody's personal experiences. In a similar fashion, he surrenders all he knows of life at school, its harshness, its overwork, its pallor, the dreary rivalry of exercises and examinations—memories which, far from being shameful, would at times stimulate him, make him love his adult state—and receives in exchange the consecrated image of the boisterous schoolboy, free from all care, living the happiest moments of his life without appreciating them as he should. To expect the average adult to pass opinion on some work dealing with infantile sexuality, is like expecting a commercial traveller just back from London to tell you whether one of Monet's skies of that city is an exact likeness.

It is more difficult to make up my mind whether becoming adult was what made it impossible for me to tread the everyday paths of sex, and in what way. For there my conversations with my chums no longer furnish points of reference accurate enough. When men are mature, some are secretive, others garrulous ; but the sincerity of childhood and adolescence has gone for good. It becomes difficult, if not to know yourself, at least to compare yourself with others.

But not to stray from actuality, the only features I believe to be in the slightest degree characteristic are the following¹ : I have a strong liking for women, and the number of women who please me is very great. The thought of discriminating is in me only secondary. And it is a negative process, eliminative. My instinct proceeds on the lines of a medical board, the object of which is, as everyone knows, not the picking out of the finest man in France, but the roping in of every recruit who is not frankly impossible. If the state of our society had lent itself, I should have been a polygamist without the slightest qualms. It is asserted that such a disposition is natural to the Southerner, and that monogamy only comes naturally to

¹ Here in particular, and in all that follows, the present tense is used for simplicity. Many of these traits, to be historically exact, ought to have been put in the past tense.

the Northern races. But it is always imprudent to go by what men do if one wants a clear idea of what they most deeply desire to do.

Is this a way of saying that actually and for a certain time at least, women heaped me with their favours? That would be a hateful boast. Actually I was most moderate. Because my sensuality was chiefly intellectual? No, on the contrary. As far as that goes, my leanings are intensely materialist. Imagination has never satisfied me. Indeed I find it rather a source of irritation.

My moderation in the first place came, I think, from the ease with which my tastes could be gratified. An instinct loses some of its violence when there are abundant possibilities of satisfying it. A glass of wine seems less precious in Provence than in Flanders, and the postman, if he is not thirsty, will refuse it without regret.

Partly also, it was due to a certain difficulty of reconciling, in the spirit, the pleasure experienced in the possession of a woman, while making her a partner in the delights of the flesh; and the entertainment to be found in women's society, the exchange of ideas and confidences, the deepening of friendship and affection. I admit that the two things can very well be reconciled. It is stimulating to talk about music to a woman, and be obsessed all the time by her breasts, her hips, and look into her eyes with a gaze whose hidden meaning she herself encourages and appreciates. The possession of a body situated thus at the furthest bound of a whole series of delicate and conventional manoeuvres, becomes something of a sport. And thus yet another way for man to differentiate himself from the brutes. But I conceive it better as affecting another than as affecting myself. The society of women is in itself a sport, and I could not enjoy it if another sport did not appear beyond it, suggesting an intoxication much more violent. Undeniably the presence of women creates around me a sort of amorous region which I experience with pleasure. But the slight emotion that is communicated to me is a stable product and not immediately decomposed into desire. Or should desire arise, all the rest, from that moment becomes mere play-acting and irritates me.

It is merely, I shall be told, because you happen to be a male

and impetuous. You find it impossible to wait and let your desires accumulate and grow urgent in the interval. And where you should have waited, you so arrange matters as to have no desire. Yes, that has some truth. But in my opinion, such a temperament depends less on the mechanism of the sexual instinct than on that of the intellect. It seems to me a question of judgment.

If, in conversation with a woman, I feel that what I am saying is not spontaneous or justified by the pleasure I take in it, but is instead a laborious progress to a physical act of possession, an elaborate task for a wage that may never be paid, I find suddenly I am passing the most humiliating judgment on what I am doing, its authority all the greater because it is informed with a sort of insolent cheerfulness (as jovial comrades might laugh at you to make you pull yourself together). Yes, suddenly the disproportion between the labour I have launched upon and the possible enjoyment three weeks thence of the little thing, all prunes and prisms in front of me, seems utterly absurd.¹ In short, I have not conviction enough to fill that comic part of handspringing male, whose strenuous bustle is to win for him in time a perfectly legitimate physiological satisfaction. A situation in which the love-object must be transfigured by another's passion. But passion is certainly not an accident that happens every day, and if anything could preserve one from it, that thing would be a certain measure of indulgence.

But in this matter, as elsewhere, not to ask diminishes one's chance of getting. Even women, who from the first have contemplated a possible liaison with no sort of repugnance, quickly resign themselves to nothing happening. All the more because in our latitudes the majority of women adore men to pay court to them, though physically their appetites are limited. Very few there are who will collapse unexpectedly into your arms. Or else those who do are the sort one politely helps to restore to themselves.

Obviously, I am speaking for men like myself, whose attraction is of the most ordinary kind ; and not for those irresistible

¹ Practically in the same way as I should have been incapable of taking up "pure idealism" by becoming aware that my real object was to succeed so-and-so as head of the faculty.

charmers who never need to sigh more than twenty-four hours, and who, even when they do not deign to sigh, are assailed on every hand. But still, on reflection, I think my attitude is the one that ensures most tranquillity to women. In my opinion, what might spur a woman to recklessness would be your coldness, whether sincere or calculated, and the distance at which you kept her. But if you are ingratiating, attentive, and appear to have deep respect for their womanhood, and no fear at all of some degree of love being implicit in your intimacy, then women, excepting certain "furies" whom one naturally guards against, will expect the offensive to come from you, and if you do not take it, will think that no doubt it is better so, more poetical, tranquillizing.

Remains, however, that case, most natural of all, when the object happens to have been attained without effort, and therefore without the annoyance of having to gauge either the rate or extent of progress. A case which must happen frequently enough. But in my own experience was that so? Not usually, at least. Possibly, because it would have demanded a concatenation of events rarer than one would think. (I am leaving aside certain facilities consequent on life on an ocean liner, questionable because of their very abundance.) Possibly, because I am not simple enough, and am incapable of seducing a woman without being fully conscious of every step I take in the matter. Possibly, also, because at the final moment a certain lethargy has at times taken possession of me, and the thought of the newness of the body has slowed down my ardour rather than excited it.

I would willingly mention also certain scruples, were I not afraid of making myself seem more moral or more innocent than I am. Nevertheless, there are two which seem to me fairly sincere. Firstly, I cannot bear to influence the decisions of others. When I invite a friend to dinner and he does not immediately accept, I never press him, so much do I fear to infringe on his liberty, so far am I from considering my company as a gift beyond price. Such a disinclination to influence the decisions of another, when that other happens to be a woman, obviously means renouncing any pretension to a seducer's career.

Secondly, it is only in very special, not to say rare cases that I will lie voluntarily, and even with a sort of pleasure. For a lie not to humiliate me, it must issue from a profound feeling of self-protection, or somehow avenge the spirit. Now in society as we know it, the simplest love-intrigue has the utmost difficulty in dispensing with falsehood, in one way or another. Of course, I have not always declined to profit by it, but I have always been conscious of it. And more than once it has pulled me up.

In this respect I am apparently out of the ordinary. It seems clear, that for the majority, love or simple desire completely suspends the veto of morality on this point. Certain of my colleagues, whose loyalty might have been even more dependable than my own as regards anything else, when it came to love, could lie as easily as one draws breath, and brag about it with a laugh.

I have just re-read the preceding paragraphs. What they clearly prove is that I am not a man habitually obsessed by sex. Otherwise, the reasons stated would have had less weight. And I make this observation because I realize, on reflection, that there must be a great many individuals obsessed by sex, and that I must certainly have rubbed elbows with many of them.

I do not know if I am using the expression in the sense accepted by specialists. Nor do I mean to designate by it such beings as Nature has endowed with unusual sexual potency, and who, in all justice, could not be held responsible for being more preoccupied than others with a function and organs of such greater vitality. In my opinion, however robust the instinct, it will find its level, its equilibrium, and within limits remain there, so long as the brain does not interfere ; by which I mean, does not begin to turn that instinct into a poison, or some tyrannical drug. I can perfectly well imagine some patriarch, the indefatigable husband of four wives, whose mind, when he walks through the fields, is swept clean of every sexual preoccupation, save as a joke or Pantagruelism, neither bitter nor enslaving. And I can imagine no less well, having often encountered such, the youthful debauchee, who, so to

speak, has no spontaneous and truly fundamental sexual needs, but who, from what little there is, succeeds in working up a permanent stock of mental intoxication. For example, he would be unable to sit beside a woman in a tramcar without immediately thinking that she ought to be his mistress ; or hear a saleswoman say " Thank you, sir," without believing that she wanted him to make love to her, and would live all the time in a sort of nervous fever, such as accompanies the earliest stages of influenza.

However, I am not unaware that too much insistence on such differences in temperament may quickly lead to error. In my own case for example, it is the looking at the whole of my life which makes me conclude I observe no sex-obsession. But without going back to that period of puberty when the adolescent day and night is caged within his desire for women, and without anticipating either those subsequent events, which I will deal with in due course, I can say that in the days of my youth I was obsessed by sex, though only as a passing crisis. I know how it feels, I know its power. I had a mistress once who, for two whole months, from the first day of our liaison to the last, turned me into someone obsessed. (If circumstances had not taken me away, I wonder whether I should have had the courage to leave her.) Her power over me was for one thing due to very simple causes ; the poignant quality of the pleasure I took in her, her odour which seemed not to identify a particular person, but to be an ambiance absolutely indispensable to my going on living, in the way that an animal depends on air ; but chiefly it was her beauty, which seemed altogether of the flesh, not so much in the sense of an animal-like density, as in its fashion of communicating to me a sort of delirium of the flesh, the feeling that the world itself was nothing in comparison with the jutting of two breasts and a flank, and the urge to immolate myself to bear witness to what nothing could prove. Then it was I learnt that he who is obsessed becomes another man. The way his body is affected by it is a constant surprise to him. Everything happens as though his flesh before that date were entirely replaced by another differently constituted flesh, which experiences sensation differently and better. And the usual ups and

downs of his moods fade into a tension that may be painful possibly, or maddening even ; but which the human soul, fearing boredom more than delirium, no doubt prefers to serenity.

Another impression left on me by the perusal of these pages, and one which does not altogether gratify me, is that I seem a little too pleased with myself. Careful scrutiny reveals the fact that all the features I describe are exact enough (in the degree in which the expression ministers to thought and exactitude is consonant with generalization). I cannot accuse myself of having distorted the facts. Yet a murmur of approbation is sensed between the lines that is sufficiently irritating. Unfortunately I could not modify this aspect except by artificially retouching it.

After all, that is one of the particulars on this identification sheet. The special combination of elements which is me among so many million others, does not happen to comprise a conscience hostile to it. I have no suppressed disgust with myself (And never have had except at moments during adolescence.) Save for certain serious reservations, it seems to me, as human nature goes, that mine is pretty satisfactory. But everyone thinks so too, I shall be told. It is customary to have a good opinion of yourself. I do not think so. I have met men, profoundly, fundamentally discontented with themselves, with the being they felt enshrined within them. And it occurs to me as possible that there may be whole races even in a similar condition. Which does not prevent their living, nor prospering, nor even having tremendous outbursts of pride by way of protest.

Well, I perceive that my sheet contains few particulars regarding what is generally known as character. But considering my angle of vision and the task I am now undertaking does it matter very much knowing whether I am active, vulnerable, choleric, or meek ? Or whether, when I spend money pleasure or fear predominates ? Does money matter to me more

on account of what it can buy or the vague prestige it conveys ? And do I tend more towards devotion or egotism ? Indeed, I could, making as the excuse the completion of my docket, begin to investigate those questions ! But it would be a pastime merely.

III

IN what has gone before, I have spoken of myself as generally as possible. Whenever I have noted a particular feature, I chose it because it seemed to represent some permanent trend, and I have not troubled to make clear at what point of my life I first became aware of it.

But the events which interest me concern a less abstract personage. The man to whom they happened, though not so different from the permanent Pierre Febvre, found himself in certain moods and situations which ought probably to be taken into consideration.

At the period I speak of I am twenty-six. I am passing through a period which physically is very satisfactory (save for the merest trifles). The complications of growing up are far behind me. My health is better than it was at twenty. The freedom which comes with being adult I have not had long, and it has lost nothing of its savour. And I am thoroughly enjoying—though realizing why—the truce that society accords young men between the completion of their studies and their incrustation with responsibilities and duties.

The occupation I pursue may turn out a mistake. (I am purser on a big liner in the Mediterranean-New York service.) But it has not yet made me feel I have declined intellectually, because I still have much of the enthusiasm of my student days for a good many things, and because I read a great deal, almost study, in fact. Besides, it is not a stupid occupation. It is active and uncomfortable. The everyday round is left in the unstable equilibrium of chance. It sustains about me that intimate coming and going of colleagues which is, perhaps, the chief happiness of adolescence, and which is usually abandoned on entry into the world of adults. Also, it does not turn such comradeships into a tiny restricted, artificial world (as in the army) where ignorance of life, the caste spirit and haughty

infantilisms are encouraged and cultivated. For one result of my constant relations with the passengers is that, willy-nilly, I am subjected to the contact of a society which is both brilliant and bizarre, not select enough to turn me into a snob or communicate its prejudices, which are too transitory to ensnare me in any way, but capable of bearing on its currents sustenance for my spirit, and with its constant stimulation, preventing my curiosity from lulling itself asleep, and my ideas of life—so often are they contradicted and corrected—from hardening too early.

And were I inclined to begin to think of humanity as composed of men in evening clothes and women in becoming *décolletées*, duty would take me below to the third-class immigrants (in those days the holds were full of them) or to the stokeholds (in those days we still used coal).

All things considered, therefore, my occupation is neither unsatisfactory nor uninteresting. Its influence upon me has not been injurious. It has preserved in me, not the actual ideas of my twentieth year, but that aptitude, special to my twentieth year, of accepting or conceiving them, and also the capacity for frequently revising, without any vast upheavals, my spiritual establishment. It maintains me in liberty and gaiety. The settling down spirit seems very remote from my nature. And when I have to run up the companion way, the need for precaution does not overwhelm me.

To be just, these excellent influences cannot altogether be left uncriticized. I may be as free in spirit, as open-minded to new ideas as at twenty, but I accept them with greater secret reserve. The keenness may have remained, may even have augmented, but at the expense of enthusiasm. My curiosity has remained more living than my faith. If my position has altered, it is in the direction of scepticism. My universe at twenty may possibly have been deficient in mysterious depths (my nature being little given to them) but at the core certain concretions were solid enough. At twenty-six I am not so much aware of them, or I feel them slipping away. In six years of life on board a liner I have seen so many people, so many things, that it is difficult to group them all round the same axis. One ends by being terribly afraid of making any generalizations at

all. (And it must be confessed that once one has succeeded in dominating the desire to generalize, being deprived of truth ceases almost to hurt.) Between the need to generalize and that for truth, there is an ancient affinity. The physicist's attitude to life is making alarming inroads on the mathematician's. Year by year God submits to having His zone of influence revised, and the devil profits. A defiant pseudo-optimism, slightly contemptuous of itself, dislodges confiding optimism. It becomes clear that the greater part of human activity is pure waste. We see, at first hand, as the result of experience, and not as some conversational paradox, that morality is not of extreme practical importance ; that the good things of existence are owned, without difficulty or serious complications, by a large proportion of what is indubitably scum, and that one quickly gets used to shaking it by the hand. Finally, one ends by assuring oneself that no vision of the universe can be considered complete without a strong dash of contempt. (This detail, among others, though of no importance in itself, grates on the teeth like a piece of grit.) The bartender on my boat was making, in those days, from four to five thousand gold francs net profit per crossing, not to mention what he made on the sly. He was making practically as much as the combined salaries of all the officers on board. Yet his post is not the result of chance nor the survival of some ancient privilege. He is part of a system carefully worked out, and comparatively recent. He is entirely at the mercy of an administration which in other matters is most punctilious and economical. Moreover, the man is a fool. Whenever I feel tempted to get excited about the "human order," or even about the more usual "human disorder," I ask myself : "And what about the bar-tender ?"

At twenty, my conception of love was not romantic. Even at that age I was little given to sentimentality. Nevertheless, without clearly formulating it to myself, I realized that some day or other love might play a considerable part in my life, and grow into one of my main interests. At twenty-six, that attitude, far from being confirmed, had rather suffered from such experiments as I could make. What I wrote earlier will, I hope, preserve me from any suspicion of fatuity. No

one has ever heard me declare, like that ship-mate, one of my subordinates, whom I sometimes woke around 9 a.m., to claim his returns relating to "lesser cleaning materials," and who would let me in, saying with a rather Southern accent, his face pale and hair ruffled, "You've no idea, old chap, the life these bitches lead me." By this he meant the passengers in the cabins-de-luxe. And there was no doubt that a number of these lovely women had found this bridge between eternal and temporal love. Even when one paid them a respect they nowise claimed, contact with them left no increased sense of the mystery of love, of woman.

As for science, it still held for me at that epoch all its intellectual charm. But as there too, enthusiasm lives on illusions, my liking for science was no longer hedged in by the sort of religion I was not very far from subscribing to six years earlier. I see more clearly in what ways it resembled a pastime, and I differ even from those splendid fellows, who, though they no longer demand that it shall reveal the secret of the universe, yet expect it to make man's happiness on earth. A modern liner is a showroom of applied science. If the doubts it may call up in us as to the ultimate beneficence of science seem less serious than those a Dreadnought would evoke, still it demonstrates that one consequence of its effort is in fact equivalent to a gigantic hopper whose aliment would be hours of labour. The transforming mechanisms which can be adapted to all this machinery are crammed with brilliant inventions, but the general problems of "return" have never been considered. Mentally I calculate it with great speed, and it amuses me. At times on board, when following some fat lady with my eye (on her way from a course of mechano-therapy to the music room, through corridors of Ripolined steel and lifts), I have worked out the hours of labour which the immense hopper of science enables this consequential contemporary in five minutes to consume, and concluded that the personal needs of Attila and Merovaeus would have been satisfied with a quarter of it.

Yet this twenty-six year old sailor has, strictly speaking, no anxieties, and does not feel in any way that he is missing something. Through the inevitable trials of the day he preserves an unswerving good-humour, which is a most

trustworthy testimony to the man's fundamental make-up. We must take it that the doubt which infiltrates into him from many directions, has not yet penetrated him through and through. On the surface he seems obviously ironical about many things, but beneath there must just as clearly be a living philosophy, which may even have compacted itself, or withdrawn to ensure its own defence. To have pruned off certain sentimental fringes, mystical processes, adolescent charms, is all to the good. Earlier, I mentioned Voltaire. This was probably the period when I was most Voltairean, if not to the letter, certainly in the spirit. My mind reverts to *Zadig*, even to *Candide*, where a provocative, hilarious scepticism, all its quills out, functions as the protecting mechanism of a purely rational worldly common sense. Yes, that was indeed my own situation. At twenty-six, I have got to a point where I believe in hardly anything, in the sense in which belief means being influenced by. I do not take in accepted ideas, as tenants on lease. Every storey of my spirit is transformed into furnished apartments. And common sense flourishes best in the basement.

I say common sense, and not the formulas in which it may happen to establish itself and fall asleep. A common sense, always available, which refuses to have its hands tied and which consequently runs no chance of being ridiculous. M. Homais is laughable because the common sense of M. Homais has not been available for years. It is in pawn.

As for this sailor however, it is not on his boat he is to be imagined, but in a rather out of the way watering-place. He was having difficulty throwing off an attack of influenza caught in the Azores, had been overworked and the company's doctor had got him six months' leave. He has come to F——-les-Eaux for the look of the thing, even though it is still practically winter and everything, except two or three hotels, shut. But he has no intention of sticking there.

He has come to F——-les-Eaux in the state of mind just indicated. On board, added to the strain of his duties, the after-effects of influenza worried him somewhat and at times

depressed him. But in this place it became merely a pleasant variant of his state of health.

That is, if the temporary importance he attaches to certain ideas ; or, at any rate, the insistence with which, from the date of his installation at F—— -les-Eaux he has reverted to them, is not to be considered as one of the effects of his influenza. For we know that a slight degree of intoxication is favourable to concentration, or rather, to continuity of thought, and is an encouragement to indulge in a series of reflections connected with each other like the chapters of a book (with possibly as the limit delirium and mania).

If this book aspired to be a novel, even though autobiographical, I should be most careful not to record the thoughts in question, nor to substitute others for them (no need to be a novelist, or specially sly, for that to occur to one). But actually they are so very individual that to the average person they would seem of no interest at all. They are difficult, but not in the least confused, and therefore bereft of the great charm of obscurity. To such as can half understand them, they convey nothing of the gratifying giddiness of lofty heights. There is nothing irresistible about them. (For as there are irresistible women, so too there are obviously irresistible ideas.) They are not likely to have marked an epoch in the life of anybody who did not claim to be either a thinker or a specialist. They cannot be used as props for one of those intellectual crises that authors have the right to set down, as they set down some marvellous love-story, attributing them to chosen spirits.

But also I am not even in a position to say what influence they had on me. For the moment I can see no link between them and what I have to recount. If I add that I cannot be absolutely certain of ever having accepted them, that rather indeed they took "possession" of me for a certain time, as troops may occupy a town, the reader may well ask why I insist on mentioning them.

Merely because I can see no justification for not mentioning them. Either this account means nothing at all, or it must refuse to allow itself any concession to what is agreeable, to verisimilitude, to the many conventions. Did he or did he not, that man at F—— -les-Eaux, towards the end of March spend

hours each day thinking the thoughts in question, never entirely divesting himself of them at any moment of each day, save to thrust them deeper into his mind? Were it merely an accident, and a most unusual one at that, they were too much present in my thoughts for me to omit them from this report.

The winter before, I had, on board, read a great deal of biology (the result, I believe, of many conversations with an eminent South American on one crossing). I felt I needed to bring my notions up to date. I had remained almost at matriculation stage.

Little by little, crossing by crossing (I bought my text books at Marseilles, New York, sometimes getting as far as a library), the scope of my reading narrowed as my interest grew. But my spirit was not entirely absorbed by it. The preoccupations, the distractions of life on board continually intervened. I stored away much more than I thought about. My reading, in spite of everything I did, remained pretty scattered, and in those days there existed no attempt at synthesis, which might have revealed to me a common trend. I had no idea I was myself beginning to perform for better or worse this task of synthesis.

Hardly was I settled in my hotel at F—— - les-Eaux, when, with the early morning coffee, I realized that the morning news (local edition) was infinitely less interesting to me than the ideas which little by little were taking shape in my mind. And that very evening I came to the conclusion that everything I thought I knew about human beings had quietly collapsed during the winter.

On principle, the frustrated physicist that I was, should have considered the matter as some slight damage to the superstructure. The really critical point was, in effect, less the question of life in general, than that of living creatures themselves and their history.

Regarding life in general, I was already armed against any very great surprises. I was not unaware that in the course of the past thirty years the essential differences assumed to exist between living and non-living matter had vanished one by one (during the very period when ladies were swooning round

Bergson). And personally, I was too familiar with the most extravagant molecular theories and the most unstable items of modern chemistry to feel at all overwhelmed by the so-called "mystery" of living matter. The synthetic reconstruction of life in the laboratory seemed to me only a matter of time and improved technique.

But for everything that had to do with the development of life on the earth, the successive appearances of living creatures, the origin and evolution of species, evolution seemed to me sufficiently and adequately proved. I knew the theory had changed since Darwin's days and in a number of ways ; but, not being a specialist myself, there was no temptation to excite myself unduly over divergences in detail. It seemed to me that those who were qualified to know were in agreement on the main principles ; that living matter might well be of the same substance as non-living, but its complexity and instability had happened to introduce a new and different world, that of organic forms, into the physical world. Life, which when seen in the cell, remains merely a chemical phenomenon, becomes something truly original when seen in organisms, and above all, in their transformations through the ages. And we who make our appearance so long after life appeared on the planet, cannot shut our eyes to the fact that, from its very origins, the ferment of life has not for a moment ceased, and even though not concentrated upon one single aim, has yet brought about many which are truly remarkable. Everything takes place as though it had been willed. The innate drive has behaved like a will, groping but tenacious. To put it differently, living creatures, instead of remaining nameless agglomerations of unstable matter, have adapted themselves more and more closely to their environments. Those forms, animal and vegetable, whose organs and functions we can contemplate to-day or rediscover in the past, express the harmony which has been established—not evenly, but with much difficulty, by jerks—between such creatures, and the conditions of their existence. That harmony, which no one premeditated or worked out, is none the less striking, and sometimes it is perfect. Its gropings are no less inspiring than its successes, since both move in a common direction. The spectacle of the agelong urge of

living things, even though proceeding from blind and natural energies, has not only grandeur but a kind of significance. Such words as patience, effort, ascent, issue spontaneously. If, for precision, we lay them aside, something is left in the spirit that resembles them. In short, it is hardly less thrilling for man to be one of the summits or the loftiest summit of evolution, than to be the first-born of a god ; and when we look at a pheasant or a rose-bush, the humbleness of the means whose achievement we see alters the note of our admiration, but does not suppress it. On the contrary, a touch of fellowship is mingled with it.

It must be added that for someone specializing in the physical sciences, this more or less directed urge of living species communicates to nature, as a whole, a dramatic interest which otherwise it would totally lack.

Thus, while the first plate of pea-soup at my hotel took advantage of my temporary distraction to get itself swallowed, I was saying to myself that that fine old conception of evolution, which to our elders had seemed the last word in disenchantment, would very soon be following the path of poetic dreams and consolatory myths. There was no longer any question of correcting details of the mechanics of evolution or its rhythms. The new postulates were much more menacing. I wonder how far the specialists, whose province they become, realize it. In the same way, a storekeeper at an arsenal ranges shells and gives no thought to their explosive potentiality.

As for me, what helped me to find my way was rediscovering a familiar spectre in these regions. I realized suddenly, and with no possibility of error, that the terrible principle of chance, which was already master of the physical world, had taken hold of the living world. Or rather, after having slyly insinuated itself within it, now at last revealed its unveiled face, excluding every presence but its own.

The organism in harmony with its environment ; the parts of that organism harmonious with each other, adapted more and more narrowly to function, helped by unrelenting penalties, the tendency towards the development and maintenance of normal types, accumulation of results, patrimony of existence, all, all was vanishing.

The monstrous-two-headed calf, the baby covered with scales, legless dog, became thus the very exemplification of the living thing, the least deceptive expression of the life processes. (What is wrong with the so-called normal individual is that he lends credence to the belief in natural harmony, much in the way that the number 39793 sets the superstitious day-dreaming.) Every combination is as valid as every other and at every instant any one is possible. Like the turn of the roulette-wheel every turn of life is independent of all the others. A living form is of itself something as arbitrary and fortuitous as the shapes made by frost upon a window-pane. The majority, the moment they are created, disappear. Some, before disintegrating, endure a while. Others do not entirely fade away, a morsel remains which serves to attract a new combination, more or less similar to what went before. In all this, there is no adaptation, properly speaking. No premium on excellence of any kind. Environment is not an aggressive adversary, a mythological hydra, indirectly beneficent, which compels the living creature to defend itself and so hitch on to progress. It is really an environment, that is to say, a container or support, almost as passive as a drawer or the surface of a table. Certain things are impossible to it (as it is impossible to make a quantity of water stand upright on the surface of a table). But an infinity of things are generally possible (as it is possible to put no matter what small object into a drawer). And the organism on its part, is not a construction of extreme precision, the parts of which are most closely interrelated, which responds to the slightest menace by a whole system of opportune reactions. It is anything that is not impossible. The most ridiculous lump of flesh, the most shapeless bunch of dud organs can perpetuate themselves through thousands of centuries and in billions of specimens, if, in all its obloquy, it does not contain within itself, or meet with any absolutely decisive cause of destruction.

In short, it seemed as absurd to talk of the trend of evolution as of the trend of Brownian movements. The history of life on the earth was no longer even a flow of chance into definite channels (at most, just one of its marshy inundations). Between the vagaries of the lines that veined the marble of the

café table and the structure of the horse, which having met the 8.15 p.m., brought back the omnibus of the Hotel des Ambassadeurs at a trot, there was no difference of any sort. What had become of the warm, the sprightly Darwinian glance with which the men of the 'nineties could still regard the living?

Such was, all through those days, my principal subject of conversation with myself. Even to-day it is impossible for me to think of F—— -les-Eaux without the fugitive vision of a terrestrial surface in which a briar-rose, a cow, a solicitor burgeon side by side like absurd materializations.

Not that I imposed these meditations upon myself like a schoolboy's exercise. I cast no glances of superiority at my neighbours, telling myself I was the only thinker in the hotel. My thoughts came very freely and with a certain cheerfulness. The face I promenaded in F—— -les-Eaux had nothing of a philosopher's. I meditated more consecutively, possibly somewhat more deeply than was usual with me, because I had nothing else to do. And as my thoughts were admirable company, I welcomed them the moment they presented themselves. Did they preoccupy me to the point of obsessing me? At the most, at certain moments they produced in me an imperceptible intoxication which went very well with the gardens of the casino, the terrace of a deserted café or a row of luxury shops, half of which were closed.

But to be entirely sincere, let me admit that the pleasure in this intellectual pastime covered a feeling more deep. These thoughts were content not merely to distract me. They moved me, and possibly more deeply than I would have cared to admit. Actually, I was in the situation of those people who have no reason at all to complain of their lot—and indeed they have a smiling expression on their faces—but whom the thought of some vast impersonal calamity, as for instance their country's defeat in war, will not permit to be completely happy.

Yet I should have thought, on arriving at F—— -les-Eaux, that very few illusions were left me to lose. I did not think of them. Faith and idealism find unexpected corners in which to take refuge. To support the aridity of the universe cheerfully,

I needed to think of the living universe as a spot made greener the slightest degree more green. I should have been much astonished to have been told so six months earlier. How can one divine that certain ideas as to the variations in living creatures have their significance in one's courage to live?

How explain also the sort of love which took possession of me about this time for the hotel-dog? He would rub up against me, demand marks of attention, words. He growled deep in his throat on one practically unchanging note. He fixed a persistent gaze on me, which became more and more meaningful and charged. No one could have been worse prepared to seek for mystery in a dog than myself at the threshold stage of my thoughts. Perhaps I was not seeking for it, but it is certain that I felt friendliness, tenderness, an almost worried interest in the animal. Was it similar to feeling one's throat tighten before a tomb, even though one believes no longer in a future life?

To tell the truth, an experiment then being made by me, though I did not suspect it, may possibly have counted more than my biological daydreams, even while encouraging them; the experiment of solitude, or a certain degree of solitude.

Yes, a long time had passed since I had been alone to such a degree. Had I, indeed, ever been? As far back as I can remember, to childhood even, I am always with those who are near to me, family, friends. My parents being but moderately well off, our apartment was small. Its full extent is abundantly utilised. Every room is a thoroughfare. And as I have two brothers, I am never alone either for play or study or even sleep. Did I even pass five minutes at home, except in sleep, without someone raising his voice to call me by my name? Even during sleep we did not cease to be aware that we were all three sleeping in the same room and that each of the other two had our repose at his mercy. The association remains unbroken. If one of my brothers moves, wakes, I guess it; the depth of my slumbers is determined more or less by all these accidents of another.

Possibly, it is at high school, during certain lectures which I

do not attend to, or which I register automatically, that I approach nearest to a state of relative isolation. But my neighbour to left or right is always on the point of whispering some remark or joke. I wait for it. And I, too, when some thought inspires me, can deliver myself there and then, if few words will express it, or in the five minutes of the next interval, if it happens to need longer to convey.

Since I have become adult and adopted this sailor's occupation, things have indubitably changed somewhat. Occasionally a whole hour passes without someone knocking at the door of my cabin. And it is understood that an apology is to be made for disturbing me. Thus, actually, to some extent I am my own master. I still delight in my friendships, but with less abandon. A grown-up dignity is supposed to wrap me round. To get at me, a slight intrusive effort has to be made. Contacts are no longer as in childhood, natural and equal. But my idea of what solitude can be is no clearer, or of what it could become if it had the time to spread itself. From 8 a.m. to past midnight, my colleagues, the crew, hundreds of people come and go, rub up against me, like so many word-pistols, loaded and cocked. The whole boat surrounds me with different zones of relationships. At night, my existence is at the mercy of a ringing bell, or some shipmate who does not feel like sleeping and wakes me up on the pretext that "There's a splendid iceberg in sight" or the "Englishman with the eyeglass is saying the most extraordinary things in the bar." Besides, sleep on board a liner is never quite the same as in a private house.

At F——-les-Eaux, I serve an apprenticeship to an entirely different state of things. I pass a whole day without uttering more than four phrases, and those four phrases occur at certain precise moments. They do not constitute a floating menace.

If, most unusually, someone addresses me between whiles ("Were you perhaps asking for the directory?" or "Can you please direct me to the post office?"), such slight bruising of my solitude neither do me prejudice nor cause me apprehension.

Yet all the time I remain in contact with the inhabitants. My background is always a dining- or smoking-room of a hotel, the street, people strolling in a park, or the last scattered houses

down some road. The degree of solitude I succeed in attaining has nothing in common with that of a hermit, being well above absolute zero. But the moment of which I write was the zero of my initiation.

To the best of my memory, the experiment in itself was not unpleasant, at least, in the beginning. The impression was one of shifting about in a medium which offered infinitely less resistances than usual, and, most of all, presented an almost unimpaired uniformity, which left no place for accidents or local concentrations, and made one immediately feel lighter.

All extensions of oneself happened effortlessly. Thought set out tranquilly, whereas in ordinary life it was always to some extent hustled. At F——-les-Eaux, I sometimes treated myself to the luxury of making the ideas that most interested me mark time, and putting them out of patience to stimulate them more. Marking time in this way, I would amuse myself with trifles. I knew that there was no chance of another's thoughts coming to dislodge mine. To fill the interval with trifles gave me not a feeling I was losing time, but of testing its resilience.

It seems too, as if one is getting to know oneself better, because one has at one's disposal all sorts of new and convenient perspectives of oneself. One has room enough to circle round one's own personality, as round some imposing edifice, whose humbler neighbours have been cleared away.

This is the moment when one's feelings become still more ambiguous. One is the victim of a sort of excessive dilatation, as if the thing one is were no longer sustained by its own bounds, as if in particular your thoughts multiplied and flowed over, like a swaying heap of bubbles in the neck of a decanter of sparkling wine.

The absence of opposition in the end begins to bother one. One discovers how necessary to public health are mechanisms of defence or ostentation. One realizes that moderate conflict with others paradoxically produces an effect of repose, and that to bring about a real feeling of relaxation some slight degree of tension must be maintained in regard to the external world.

It is then that ideas are born in greater profusion and more

rapidly. Even those which are still formless refuse to wait. It is impossible to put them back in their places again. All the turmoil in your brain too much enthrals you. The spirit is like a page where the typography has invaded the spaces between the lines as well as the margins, or a drawing in which there are not enough neutral areas or greys. And without being able to say exactly at what moment contentment vanished, a thin anxiety has taken its place.

You ask yourself "Am I, by chance, feeling bored?" Nevertheless, what one is experiencing does not answer at all to what one thought one knew as boredom. Until then boredom had seemed some sort of mental inanition. One was bored when the intellect had nothing, or all but, to chew; when some monotonous occupation, or dull conversation, or flaccid story left it three-quarters idle. Which gave every mental activity a reassuring aspect. To suffer because one's capacities are not fully employed, and to complain of lack of appetite, what could, in fact, be healthier?

And suddenly it appears that thought behaves like some very special substance, not obviously dangerous, possibly, but needing to be watched, like those liquids which do not attack their containers, so long as they are not allowed to stand in them. That it should be produced in some excess is not, all things considered, very grave, so long as it is speedily eliminated. But in solitude, even when qualified, elimination goes badly. Ideas cannot resolve to quit. I even think that the longer they take to go, the more new ones are formed, as if the irritation caused by their remaining in one place increased the activity of the spirit.¹

In short, at the end of three weeks, and even earlier, I could not deny the beginning of *malaise* in myself. I paid as little attention to it as I could. I called it boredom in order to get rid of it. I avoided attributing it to my state of solitude. I preferred to accuse the little town in vague and general terms.

¹People seem clearly to feel this. Going by the behaviour of any fairly normal man, no one could say he fears his own thoughts, but he mistrusts them. In general, he will do all he can to prevent their piling up in the same place. A precaution that, possibly, animals take, too. I have seen dogs turn round on themselves, curling up with a sigh, deliberately seeking sleep, after a look that said they had had enough of something that was going on inside them.

" Anywhere else, it would be delightful." " Here the setting happens to be just too dreary."

Which meant that my experiment in solitude had lasted long enough. I was not expressly thinking of another. But possibly that was what I was waiting for.

IV

TOWARDS the third week of my stay in F——-les-Eaux I suddenly remembered that in that very district I had some second or third cousins, of the same generation as my parents. They lived quite close to a small town on the main line, where there was a junction. All the expresses made a halt there. Most people going to F——-les-Eaux generally passed through that station, as I had done myself. While changing trains, I had been struck by the size of the station and the spaciousness of the out-buildings, but without calling to mind that this was just the place where a certain cousin, Barbelenet, was in charge of the shops and lived with his family.

I had never seen these Barbelenets. But I had heard them spoken of. I imagined them worthy provincials, utterly boring and with no saving graces, such as an ancient house, fine furniture, a garden abutting on a church ; just a middle-class family housed by a great enterprise and smoky with locomotive fumes.

Yet they had hardly come into my mind before I felt a desire to take a turn in their direction. I did not know whether I would call on them. But I would stroll round the station. If need be, I could ask after them. But it would be interesting, whatever happened.

What chiefly attracted me was the thought of the immense station which I had hardly glimpsed ; I felt it was a place I would like to wander in at hazard. F——-les-Eaux was beginning to make me long for more lively experiences.

And indeed, the search for cousin Barbelenet furnished an excellent pretext for wandering through all sorts of out-buildings, closed to the general public. I discovered him in person in one of the shops, standing before a damaged locomotive, supervising its being stripped. He took me home with him. It was getting dark. I had a fairly quick glass of

Madeira, and at the same time made the acquaintance of Madame Barbelenet and one of the daughters. I accepted an invitation for dinner on the day but one following.

All the way back, I could think of nothing but what I had seen. The impression I had of my relatives, was, as yet, only a summary one. But their house had astonished me. Standing at a great distance from the passenger-station, in a vast delta of railway-tracks, which had to be crossed one by one to get to it, it seemed as affecting as some fisherman's hut on a little isle. Scourged day and night by the rushing trains as by Atlantic breakers, a sailor could not refuse it his warm greeting nor his astonishment.

As to its interior, five minutes was enough to make one sensible of all those multitudinous dreary undercurrents which seem so nearly related to great vices. Once that had been felt, you could be sure you would want to experience it again.

The day but one following, at dinner, I saw them again more closely, and I saw all four. But chiefly I discovered the kind of table they kept. As with the greatest poets, there was nothing extraordinary about it. It avoided even seeming to have been given special attention. But with authoritative calm it revealed the immense resourcefulness of everyday foods.

Having got so far, but little was needed to interest me in my hosts themselves. In particular, Madame Barbelenet's relationship with her daughters was so slow and complicated that after a time it became as fascinating to watch as a dance of sea-horses in an aquarium.

In this manner I always discovered some reason for returning (something I wanted to see again, something else I had not quite seen). My stay at F——-les-Eaux continued beyond anything I had anticipated. Nothing called me elsewhere and altogether I was convalescing excellently. My discovery of the Barbelenets, a long series of surprises, had come just at the right moment to ventilate a solitude that was beginning to turn sour. The few kilometres that separated us did not prevent me making the journey whenever I wanted to see them. It kept them from looking in on me. Once back in F——-les-Eaux, there was no risk of accidentally meeting them in the

street, or seeing them descend on me at the hotel. The short distance functioned like a semi-permeable membrane.

Unfortunately, there were two young women in the house, and I was foolish enough not to reflect that my assiduity alone might give cause for misinterpretation. The Barbelenets could not for a moment attribute it to some magic charm possessed by their house. If they had felt that charm, they would not have dared believe in it. As for the table they kept, they knew it was good, but they were used to it. They could hardly gauge its importance for someone staying at the Hotel des Ambassadeurs.

Besides, I was not very prudent. I have said already that I liked the society of women. These two young women were neither stupid, nor even ordinary. The conditions of their existence, the refined pressures to which their mother had subjected them had compacted rather than distorted their minds. The whole of their youth had been steeped in tedium, and the process had been so complete that something with a savour of its own had resulted. Also my position as a relative had from the outset spared me a good deal of ceremony. I had begun to talk to them with sincerity. That alone must have been enough to affect them. They must certainly have imagined that between young people of the opposite sexes, conventional forms of expression form a zone of protection, which only the deepest impulses could dare to cross. A complicated intrigue, almost unsuspected by me, was the result. Each of the two young women, turn and turn about, imagined I loved her ; or persuaded herself I did. The mother, in whom an uncommon sagacity was strangely combined with a majestic refusal to see anything that might bother her, was probably not deluded to the same extent. But she may have thought that a little management might help along a marriage. The sympathy which I showed for them, if not inspired by love, would be all the easier to handle. As cousin and devoted friend of the two young women, I would allow myself, without very much resistance, to be transformed into the husband of the elder, whom they wished to marry first. As for the father, his opinion hardly mattered. He was as incapable of showing the family their error as he was of opposing them. Besides he

had become friendly to me. Had he been consulted as to this laudable project, he would heartily have applauded it.

I realized my situation somewhat later. What I did to put things right may not perhaps have been particularly adroit. But I was determined to get out. I was preparing a retreat, which should not seem too loutish, when I met Lucienne.

For some time past Lucienne had been giving piano lessons to the two sisters. I had often heard her praised, and at first without paying very much attention. As for her so-called talent at the piano, the Barbelenet's opinion hardly seemed a guarantee. They had also vaunted her distinguished appearance, which coming from them, seemed more disquieting than anything else. I paid more attention to her however when I had been told a few facts about her. She came of moderately well-off people, but in order not to owe anything to her mother, whose re-marriage she disapproved of, she had started out to make her own living by using her gift for the piano in teaching. She had come to this tiny provincial town to chance her luck, with no other introduction than a friend, mistress at the girls' high school. These facts had been gleaned, not from herself, for she was reserved, but from the friend.

Madame Barbelenet one day said something like this to me, though she wrapped it up more. "If you would like to hear Mademoiselle Lucienne play, and make her acquaintance besides, be here to-morrow a little before tea. I will arrange things."

I was sure she would arrange it admirably. Madame Barbelenet, who saw few people, had a genius for social relations. I have never met anybody with her gift for making those to whom she spoke of others feel they must know them, for their mutual pleasure and profit ; or for working up such a meeting, and introducing people to each other, without in any way compromising herself or saying anything concrete, so that if it fell through or went off badly, a doubt always remained as to whether she had been heard aright.

The gathering was of the simplest. Madame Barbelenet explained my presence, for which Lucienne was unprepared,

somewhat at too great length. The drift of her remarks was that circumstances merely had brought us all five together (the father being present), which absolved her from all responsibility in the event of any of us not being as delighted as she was herself.

Then Lucienne went to the piano. She played her opening bars so well, that I immediately stopped watching her execution the better to listen to what she played. She was asked to play two or three more pieces.

The conversation that followed had a certain spontaneity. What was pleasant about the Barbelenet girls was that they had been taught to be reserved on ceremonious occasions, and not indulge in pretentious mannerisms. My own relations with them had not encouraged them in that direction either. When it seemed to them that the time for being on ceremony was over, and that they had something to say, they said nothing striking, but what they said gave one an impression of extraordinary freshness, because one felt these young things were thinking of the relevance of what they were saying and not of its effect on the gallery. Old man Barbelenet, though often silent, was by no means incapable of making solid remarks when the subject came within his experience. Madame Barbelenet might perhaps have exasperated me had I been her son, or feared becoming her son-in-law, but for the simple amateur I was, she was of inexhaustible interest. It is only since knowing her that I realize, for example, in art, how much ingenuity may be hidden in the dullest parts of a work, or in a work which is altogether dull. Her insinuations, the way she emphasized certain remarks, the manner in which she distorted what you said in order to make it sound more sociable, the inclined and soapy planks she at every moment slipped between one person and another, all these miracles of intervention, in addition to entertaining the mind, provided besides a euphoria like some narcotic potion.

As for Lucienne, she only took the most casual part in the conversation. At the beginning, indeed, she seemed rather absent, as if still thinking of what she had been playing. But afterwards she listened attentively, observantly, although remaining silent. For a few moments I felt her scrutinizing

me with a sharpness of vision which was almost intimidating, but in which there was no trace of effrontery. But later she grew more animated, as if our conversation had suddenly begun to interest her. Yet the matter under discussion was as ordinary as it had been.

It is difficult for me to recapture in its purity the impression from that moment that she made upon me. I liked her, certainly. I will even say that I loved her then and there. But given my then point of view, that was perfectly natural. I considered that when a man and woman meet, love is born as naturally as mist at morning on a river, and that it is only its persistence which makes it worthy of mention, as in the case of a mist which should last three weeks say. (I still have that theory, but much elaborated.) I should not, therefore, have noticed this fact, if something special had not been linked with it.

In the compartment which took me back to F——-les-Eaux, I concentrated on conjuring up Lucienne again. I realized then that it was not easy. Her beauty—for she was beautiful, very beautiful even, undeniably so—her beauty could not be recaptured. I had looked at her several times. My visual memory happens to be good. I could recapture the approximate outlines of her face, and chiefly the glow of her complexion and the luminosity of her skin, but not the drawing of her features. When I thought of her eyes, and tried to make them turn to mine, they did so by degrees, but as they came closer the rest of her face vanished. It was not the eyes themselves that were delivered up, but only the impression they had made on me.

Altogether that young woman had robbed me of the power to scrutinize her dispassionately. I was not upset, and my heart did not beat more quickly, as when some touch of passion troubles it. Rather, a hardly conscious stupor had possession of me. To emphasize what I mean, if some miraculous happening had that very night put Lucienne in my arms, I believe I should not have been able to possess her physically.

Even her words came back to me as if protected. I did not rack my brains to find them in any way extraordinary or profound. I was perfectly aware that we had spoken only of

the most ordinary things. But they had put all my critical faculties to sleep. I had no desire to judge them. I was prepared merely to hear them again with pleasure.

Ordinarily, it was during this eleven-minute journey from the house among the railway lines that I felt solitude close round me once again. The accompanying sensations were very precious to me. I would discount them beforehand and enjoy them like a cigar. As far as the train, I still remained the guest of the Barbelenets ; in fact, the father sometimes accompanied me. My plunge into society would not have worked off yet. But then I would climb into a compartment which there was no difficulty in finding empty. I wedged myself in a corner against the soiled blue upholstery. The train started. The light of the oil lamp fell through a little puddle swaying over a deposit of soot. I became alone once more. When I got out at F——les-Eaux, I was a lonely figure crossing a platform with a dozen other muffled travellers.

But this time, solitude was slow to return. Not only could I not stop thinking of the party from which I was coming, and which had continued after Lucienne's departure, but the very shadowiness of the compartment, so neutral usually, so well adapted to leave a man to his thoughts, seemed almost palpable, full of mysterious tensions, vibrant with inward light.

This illusion showed no signs of abating during the following days. Even the morning walk at ten, in the correctly deserted streets which neighboured the casino garden, could not dissipate it.

On the other hand, I thought of Lucienne more freely. But by the next day, I had got to saying to myself something like this : " This young woman is beautiful and distinguished. She is not rich. She is her own master. It would be pleasant to have her as a mistress for a time. If we go about it decently, prudently, I do not see how it could harm anybody."

The prospect made me cheerful. My leave took on the most alluring aspect. I stopped regretting the chance that had led me to F——les-Eaux, and my first visit to the Barbelenets now seemed to point to a most superior *flair*.

I have said already that I am no lady's man. Yet, I thought I was practically sure to succeed. I was already asking myself

a number of lesser questions, such as "Has Lucienne not had other adventures?" or more forthrightly, "Is Lucienne a virgin?" I wanted the answer to be "Yes," for my self-esteem, "No," for my peace of mind.

My second meeting with Lucienne took place shortly afterwards, on a Tuesday, in circumstances very similar to those of our first meeting. I was in excellent spirits. Lucienne, at our request, played a little. Then I talked to her, much more than on the first occasion, and more directly. We talked about music. The others said little.

I had probably not forgotten my intention of making Lucienne my mistress. But it little affected what I was saying. What at that moment was developing out of our converse together, for me, was not desire, nor even love really, but a generous and true comradeship. Not one of the women I had known had ever given me that feeling of perfect equality and abundant interchange. The pleasure I found in it quite took possession of me. The Barbelenets wholly faded out. When Lucienne rose to go, it was as though I had no reason for being separated from my comrade. I rose too. And much later it came to me that the Barbelenets must certainly have been counting on my dining with them.

As we left the station, I was very conscious of the inconsiderateness of my behaviour, certainly as far as Lucienne was concerned. But the subject we had at that moment started happened to be most particularly stimulating. It was impossible to separate, leaving the subject in the air. Lucienne was kind enough to agree. She made us take a complicated route, badly lit, rather muddy, but deserted, which protected us from chance encounters which might have been awkward for her in that tiny town.

What we were discussing was, in fact, my encounter with the Barbelenets, the girls "crush" on me, echoes of which had reached her, and the opinion of me she seemed to have drawn from all she had heard. As she, too, seemed to believe in my eventual betrothal, I felt bound to protest and justify my conduct, explain my position in detail, and talk about myself in reason and out. Practically all Lucienne did was to listen. Sometimes she put an adroit and friendly question. I was

happy to be opening myself to her. It was a regret to have, all said and done, so few secrets to reveal.

I was too swept away by the flood of my confidence to think about anyone else. But even while I talked, my feelings were rapidly developing. If, instead of leaving them to themselves, I had had to express them, it is probable that the mere resistance of the words would have slowed them down.

Lucienne pleased me more and more. One by one, every form of kindness, of tenderness came to life in me, like a crystalline flora. My comrade, step by step, was turning into my beloved. She spoke some few words and immediately I had fallen under the spell of the hidden charm of her voice, though until that moment I had no suspicion of it. Or else, some scrap of light, from where we could not tell, floating on the air like a leaf, would touch her face, and for a moment light it up for me, and I could seize some movement of her lips, her eyes, the frankness of her glance, deep confidence and yet impulsiveness, mingled with understanding, rapidly revealed between one darkness and another. Then I too became all confidence and impulse. I held myself back not to take advantage of the dark streets and kiss her, but there was so much tenderness in my restraint that all my desire, my egotism could not avail against it. I remembered just enough of my project of seducing her to be ashamed of it. And I was glad it was gone, in order to be able to abandon myself to my sensations of floating on an abundant stream. My usual mechanisms of foresight and precaution were suspended; my sense of the future, even in ordinary times somewhat in abeyance, deliciously paralysed.

In spite of our windings, we at last found ourselves in the very centre of the town. And at the very moment we are thinking it is high time to separate, someone passes and bows; and it is the elder of the Barbelenet young ladies (and the most redoubtable, at that).

For me it was like a danger signal. In a couple of sentences, I give Lucienne to understand the extent to which I have compromised her and that I am joyfully ready to accept every responsibility. Had she urged me in the slightest, or rather, had she challenged me, I was man enough to have demanded

her hand then and there, and to fix the date for the wedding. But instead, she had the delicacy to treat my words as a jest, and to part from me as though nothing had happened.

I try to be brief. I would like to be even more so. It is not for the pleasure of reviving this modest idyll—real as it may be—that I snatch the time from my usual occupations.

It might perhaps have been enough to refer to these preliminary events in the fewest words possible, without actually troubling to report them. But the following afterthought would have remained. "Superficially, the circumstances in which I met Lucienne, and which established the ties between us; the incidents and even the feelings which marked the beginning of our relationship, are of no especial interest. They seem in no way to differ from the most ordinary routines of love. But to allow, in fact, that nothing did happen is altogether inadmissible. I could not come near Lucienne for the first time without being aware of something in some degree exceptional, without being "warned" of it in some way or other. The beginnings of this love cannot have resembled those of every other. But close scrutiny would have been necessary to prove it.

To dispose of an afterthought of such a nature, one means only exists; that of putting it to the test it demands, and proving it mistaken.¹

The day following this walk, I was so far from feeling in love that a trifle would have sobered me. I woke to the seriousness of the fine gesture I had attempted the evening before, the value of the liberty which I had, by the merest word, compromised, possibly beyond recall. I was angry with myself in a more abstract fashion also, for having allowed my

¹ When I wrote this, I was not yet aware that Lucienne had herself written upon the same events. (See pp. 264, etc.) Otherwise, I should have expressed myself with less assurance. Also all this part of my effort would have seemed unnecessary. I have allowed it to remain, as being of documentary interest.

acts so far to betray my intentions. A bright undergraduate seemed to me much more the master of his acts than I, and infinitely more astute.

I must add that these regrets lacked conviction and did not last long. I did indeed go on smiling at myself, somewhat. I was already, in anticipation, saying farewell to the free years of my youth and I cannot say I was unmoved by it. I felt as one who waves to the shore as his boat leaves on a voyage which excites him, but which his more knowing colleagues have refused. Good! I was making a fool of myself. Well, all things considered, it was neither base nor unpleasant.

I should however have reacted altogether differently had Lucienne seemed to be taking advantage of what had happened between us, or to be presuming in any way on the contract I had implied. Another, in her place, for instance, would most certainly have sent me a twelve-page letter, which, while pretending to regret our imprudence, to be only concerned for the frightful situation I had put her into, to be wholly occupied regretting her calm, industrious, girlish existence, would conclude by saying in no uncertain terms that the damage was not irreparable, since I had definitely promised to remedy it. Possibly even a P.S. like this might have followed: "Forgive me, I ought not to be writing this to you, but I seem hardly to know what I am doing. I want suddenly to lay my head on your breast (manly). And I thrill with happiness at the thought of the (sweet) little nest we shall make together." A reminder put thus, or any similar proceeding, would have restored me to the full use of my faculties. I should have seen the occurrence in its true proportions, and they were modest ones. I should have thought that the Barbelenets' home was decidedly set with traps, that, if an imprudence had been committed, Lucienne was herself in part responsible; and that, all things considered, the matter was hardly serious. A blind respect for a promise lightly given has always seemed to me a handicap especially created for the honest (I have so often suffered from it). I think I should have found the energy to take the train to Marseilles.

But no letter came. And I did not meet Lucienne as if by chance in the principal street of F——-les-Eaux, when I went

for my usual walk after lunch. Better still, I felt that nothing of the kind would happen, and that if I went to earth, no attempt of any kind would be made to stir me up again, and that Lucienne might meet me subsequently at the Barbelenets or elsewhere without revealing any signs of feeling other than an imponderable touch of scorn.

So much so in fact, that my reflections turned into a panegyric on her, a love more certain, a desire to go on repeating our impulsivenesses.

The following day, soon after noon, I set out for the Barbelenets. I was going with a clearly conceived plan. I would try and find Madame Barbelenet alone, or I would find an excuse for taking her aside. I would confess myself frankly to her. I would ask her what she thought of Lucienne, and what she might possibly know of the young woman that she had not told me. If all went well so far, I would beg her to lend me her good offices, and herself speak to Lucienne, so as to arrange a new meeting for us. It also seemed a good opportunity for giving Mme Barbelenet to understand that such a meeting could only take place in her house, and that the slight incident of the other evening, related possibly in malice by her daughter, was not in the least a usual happening.

Matters fell out partly as I had wished. Madame Barbelenet happened to be alone. Her husband was in the workshops, her daughters paying a call. We could talk tranquilly. But Mme Barbelenet had an incredible power. Where it was a matter of concrete ideas or precision of language and thought, her influence was positively paralysing. In conversation it was impossible, not only to drag explicit phrases from her, but also to articulate them oneself. Her horror of the appropriate, the direct term, was contagious. Within a certain zone surrounding her, you began, despite yourself, to feel human thought was something necessarily obscene. The whole thing was to find drapings loose enough to hide and at the same time reveal the form beneath, which by that very token became exciting. (I have reflected since on this profound instinct in Madame Barbelenet, on the conception of the universe implied by it, on the virtues such an attitude may possess. Madame Barbelenet seems to me related to our French classics, to

diplomats and to primitive peoples, all of whom at times use astonishing precautions where naked thought is concerned.)

But this did not prevent Madame Barbelenet admirably comprehending the motives of my visit, nor the conversation from progressing. Where that lady was concerned, ideas expressed in general terms, passing allusions, were not escapes, nor ways of uttering polite nothings ; they were elaborations of her own technique. Protected by the artificial mists in which she thus carried out her evolutions, she was even able at times to move her forces more rapidly than others.

I left, therefore, furnished with a number of assurances ; the facts as regarded Lucienne had been few, but excellent, and from a reliable source (that lady-professor at the high-school, her childhood-friend). Everything they had been able to observe of her had been in her favour. With regard to money, it was wisest to expect nothing for the time being. But the family seemed well off. And there was nothing to prove that marriage meant Lucienne had no rights she might not with justice claim from her mother. To my great surprise, Madame Barbelenet seemed not to remember that she herself had two marriageable daughters, nor that there had ever been any question of allocating me one. No outside consideration apparently affected the impartiality of her advice. Without showing enthusiasm for my plan, she did not consider it in any way absurd. Lucienne's habit of work, the apprenticeship served to economy and personal discipline, were worth perhaps as much in her eyes as a dowry, in an age when even investments lack security. The feeling I got, was that having seen the event coming, Madame Barbelenet, in her superior wisdom, judged it vain to oppose it and so took it willingly under her wing.

Besides, if I had had later to swear to all this, even to save my life I could not have quoted in support of my statement one single phrase uttered by Madame Barbelenet. I had understood. But how, I could not tell. There was only one phrase that had any definiteness at all. And that was for me to invite Madame Barbelenet and her daughters to a day's outing on the following Sunday. We would visit F——-les-Eaux by way of Notre Dame d'Echauffour, where the ladies would

attend mass. There was nothing to prevent me imagining Lucienne would be of the party. But that detail would arrange itself without my intervention.

Taken thus in hand and directed, there was little risk of anything going wrong. In effect, the projected excursion took place. Lucienne made one of the party. To each and all, it provided an occasion for making known our attitudes and feelings for the future. That very evening Lucienne and myself were dining in the house of the Barbelenets like lovers officially betrothed, whose love society protects. And seven weeks later we were married.

In the interval, nothing really worthy of note had taken place. If, yet again, this account were merely for the pleasure of relating certain events, I should not have the courage thus to sacrifice circumstances, which, when I lived them seemed delightful and rare. But they offer nothing more remarkable than what went before, and they added nothing to what I have just set down. At the moment of our marriage, Lucienne had been for me the most reassuring, the least mysterious creature imaginable. On the eve of our wedding, as two months earlier, my feeling was that I was committing a charming but not extraordinary imprudence. It had been a pleasure to discover in her, in all their detail and the strong illumination of our daily commerce, the most diverse charms. Certainly, my love for her had not stopped growing or deepening. It was clear to me that a finger's breadth divided it from true passion, and that it would unhesitatingly have flamed up with intensity, if, instead of being my fiancée and a fiancée (dare I say procured) by the Barbelenets, Lucienne had been my mistress, or on the way to becoming it. But the perspective of marriage, the very restraint I was determined to maintain all through our betrothal (I meant not to cheat the conventions I was accepting) though it did not chill my ardour, was a protection against exasperation.

Besides, I was no longer an adolescent, nor a novice. I was quite capable of enjoying a feeling, even of abandoning myself to it as an inspiration to action without any great loss of awareness. I could not forget that my adventure was very far

removed from anything I could have foreseen in regard to myself. My cheerfulness, my pleasure in risk, made it difficult for me to attach much importance to the material difficulties in wait for me. I saw them as out of the corner of an eye. But I was much more affected by the way in which my youth was being curtailed. The absurd expression "end it" harassed me like a fly. Despite myself, I could not help connecting the collapse which had once led me from ambitious studies to a modest occupation, with the facile way in which I had entered on a situation no less serious. It provided sufficient matter for a general verdict on my true character and the form of my destiny. That verdict left no place for pride.

It is true that it was in Lucienne's absence that such ideas haunted me. When I saw her again, it was suddenly as though in my solitary cogitations I had made some terrific, some undiscoverable error in my calculations. In her presence, all comparisons of values were transformed. And even if my freedom to decide had been restored to me, I should still have said : "I want her for my wife."

It was, if it has any importance, a sort of warning. But I cannot recall having had any other at that time.

V

OUR marriage was fixed for June 21st. As I had been on leave since the end of February, there still remained two months of freedom to make the most of with Lucienne. This consideration alone would have made me hurry on events. As for the date itself, we found it amusing to choose that of the summer solstice.

For the first month we had arranged to travel, after which we should begin to set up house in Marseilles. I knew my France badly. Lucienne too. We had little money and we wanted to keep some for our home.

We had decided therefore to do our travelling in France. We should go from one town to another by train. We should make a few brief stops. And we should so arrange matters as to alight in Marseilles towards the end of July.

I had not been altogether without anxiety as to the material aspect of our tour. Generally speaking, I am a bad manager. In the first place I am not too good at counting. Not that I am really spendthrift. But I do not feel comfortable with the system of prices to which the public bows. It astonishes, or more exactly, intimidates me. I endure it without attempting to understand it, and as though I were in the presence of some little-known phenomenon, I dare not work things out beforehand. I spend from hand to mouth. My occupation, by affording me too much protection from the cares of managing my private means, has prolonged that incapacity in me.

But a week before the marriage I was reassured, for Lucienne, with a charming knowing air, had begun to consult time-tables and guides, and work out our probable expenses, from which, to my wonderment, nothing at all had been forgotten; not even the probable cost of the hotel omnibuses, or the sending of picture postcards (to the Barbelenets especially). She also ordered our tickets for the circular tour so very ingeniously

that we were spared a host of complications *en route*. But what was best, our safe arrival at Marseilles was guaranteed, even though in the latter stages of our journey we might have to spend the night in the train, and dine on an orange.

I watched her activity amusedly. I thought to myself: "This charming girl, who can keep up with the most subtle conversation, who is extraordinarily sensitive, and who responds to what is beautiful and fine in a quite unusual manner, masks a determined and practical woman. In certain respects she resembles a certain type of Frenchwoman who is met with in the most diverse conditions of society, from the shopkeeper who fills all her shop with her perpetual and superabundant activity, to the 'political hostess' of the past, the counsellor of kings and ministers."

Before this date, I had never thought of marriage nor, in consequence, of the type of wife to suit me. Yet had I been assured with convincing authority that some day I should marry, no doubt I would have conjured up some girl, ill endowed with graceless parents, accustomed to idleness and precarious luxury, never having known how a pillowcase buttons up, nor whether an egg is worth sixpence or a penny. I am not saying that such was my ideal. It was a probable danger.

The chance which had side-tracked this "probable danger," to put a woman like Lucienne in my way, seemed undoubtedly kindly disposed, though a trifle paradoxical. Sometimes that thought made me laugh. And when I looked at her I would think, "She will arrange my life, but discreetly, because she understands things deeply. And she will not make it an excuse for domination, for she is tender and also very womanly, and has within her the profound traditional feeling of the subordination which woman feels to man. Even if, when we try it out, she reveals herself superior to me in a dozen ways, she will always be convinced that those particular ways are not the most important ways, and that any one of my imagined superiorities eclipses all of hers. For example, I am sure that her gift for the piano, real as it is and full of promise, seems inferior in her eyes to the scientific genius she attributes to me, entirely without proof, and which in any case, remains but a memory of my youth."

Another matter which I saw no reason for not wondering about, intrigued me more. "Would Lucienne be a sensual wife? And in the first place, ought I to want a sensual wife?" On this second question I did not hesitate long. A cold spouse might suit the gentleman who has made a loveless match for the money it may bring him, or for the half-dozen children he means to beget (with a proviso to indulge his less civic pleasures elsewhere), or even the tired gentleman who has got to the age where conversation is of most importance. But I was marrying young, irrespective of advantage or duty, and with every intention of abiding by all the conditions. Marriage not having, so to speak, been my vocation, I was all the more disposed to make the condition yield the modest degree of happiness latent in it. And when, putting aside my particular case, I tried to formulate a general definition of the virtues of the good wife, I would always fall back on these three: cheerful, faithful, sensual. (Intelligent yes, but that was already an extra.) Sometimes even, it seemed to me, that of these three cardinal virtues, the last counted most.

Was Lucienne sensual? Or would she become so easily? I am not one of those "know-alls" who can, it seems, see it in any woman at first sight. At moments certainly, her eyes would light up, her lips and nostrils flare, her breast rise magnificently; all of which seemed to foretell a capacity for sensuality, and made me, I confess, very impatient to put it to the test. But at other times I hardly knew what to think. I did not go so far as to suspect her of frigidity in its truest sense, that morbid coldness as intractable as delirium. But this beautiful thoughtful young woman must have meditated on many things, and have evolved a discreet and solid philosophy for herself, so that, without laying any claim to austerity, her philosophy might yet be compatible with a certain lack of esteem for physical love. Does it not happen to us men, to the most ardent of us, to turn in disgust from the flesh, in a sudden perception of its nature, the possibly not foul, but certainly, protoplasmic nature of pleasure; seeking refuge in philosophies based on our disgusts (which cut away its casual and somewhat comic sides)? In a woman of average sensuality, less openly solicited by her body than a man, less accustomed

to indulge it, such a disposition may stabilize itself more finally. The spirit, though prohibiting nothing, cannot allow the measure of approval necessary for sensuality to come into being. I called to mind the faces of women as one sees them in statues of the Middle Ages, or its pictures ; faces which it cannot be said are either frigid or cold, nor even that they look as if they had stiffened themselves against their instincts. But what they do show is that a certain hierarchy of what was worth while and pleasurable had been established once for all, and that it was unlikely that male caresses could change matters. Even if time and repetition might have given them that power, the opportunity would have been denied them. I remembered also how walking through Paris, I had gone into some church in an ancient aristocratic quarter, like Saint Sulpice or Saint Clotilde, one evening about four. And among the old maids, bearing the heavy imprint of their occupational deformations, the waddling besilvered dowagers, a few pustulous hags, suddenly one sees a young woman kneeling, pretty, well-liking, her piety neither demonstrative nor suspect, who is using the place in which she finds herself to satisfy a spiritual need. Such young women I have at times imagined in the conjugal bed. There can be no doubt that certain of them, without transition and as though mechanically, express therein a healthy appetite for carnal pleasures, and enjoy with gusto the proffered occasion and the sanctioned male, without giving the least thought to the dim interior of Saint Sulpice in which some few hours earlier they were so deeply plunged in prayer; and that others, on the contrary, hark back to that dimness and their prayers, and are excited by them, and seek to revenge themselves on purity and the tapers : and, to ensure that the conjugal act shall be a sin, enrich it with everything their fantasy and ostentatious lubricity can invent ; while still others, badly seconded by their husbands (debilitated, unprepared, or more narrow in their piety) or convinced that the sin of marriage remains incurably venal and an inadequate basis for confession, go elsewhere to demand from some lover a sensuality more ambitious ; and others again, at the opposite extreme, who stretch themselves out sighing, as if on an operating table, and turn their thoughts from the wretched

duties of the state to which their espoused bodies are the mortified instruments, and testify their resignation to the incomprehensible will of the Deity so well that their husbands promptly go off to shop girls or typists, leaving them to prepare a sour sort of domestic lunacy for their fifties. But even better I picture the prettiest, the most distinguished of them, bringing to the marriage bed when they love their husbands, nothing but sweetness and devotion, though astonished despite themselves by the value such acts appear to have for the man. With indulgence and a trace of pity they look down on the transports caused by his desire, and do all they can not to show that the man whom they so much otherwise admire has become, because of them, something both infantile and bestial in their eyes. And everything else in their attitude is a trying to make him understand that they do not esteem him any the less for it, that they are even touched by the homage of his sensuality, but that they are very grateful he cherishes them for quite other reasons.

That is what at moments I feared to find in Lucienne, not frigidity, but a lack of conviction ; a constraint of the body, in no way forced, but the natural effect of a certain nobility of spirit affecting her judgment.

We had been undecided as to where the ceremony should take place. Mme Barbelenet advised Paris, because Lucienne's mother lived there, and in order not to seem to emphasize my wife's half-breach with her family. Lucienne was not much in favour of the idea. But it was even more unpleasant to exhibit herself to the tiny town, under the eyes of her pupils. So she fell in with my suggestion. F——-les- Eaux, which had its comic side, like all holiday places, seemed to me quite a good setting for a marriage. The ceremonies would take on the slight tinge of necessary humour.

By the same token we were left free to invite only indispensable persons. And the elder of the Barbelenet girls on that day at least, could, without too great unlikelihood, invoke a headache to prevent her travelling. Another advantage was that at 5 p.m. all our guests would have caught their train home.

We should leave at the same time, and Rouen would mark the first stage of our trip.

In the train, then during the meal at the hotel, though entirely attentive to Lucienne, I had been thinking of our new condition, of my own particular part in it, and of the fears I have already set down. Even in one's thoughts it is difficult to call the bridal night anything else. When the words are said, one cannot quite master, as one would like, the accompanying ideas and images, none of which is, of course, lugubrious, but none of which either is free from a certain coarseness. As one of my colleagues said once, the angels that hover over the bridal bed always look like bridegrooms.

I was not unaware that the abandoning of myself to an increasingly passionate tenderness would provide a quick and easy way out of the self-consciousness caused by this situation, leaving only its specific intoxications. But I had never yet set our relations altogether on that plane, and I would not have liked Lucienne to think I was producing it specially for the occasion.

Besides, what is most important is not, it may be, suppressing one's own detachment. If the intoxication thus created cannot be communicated, it becomes a menace. Very grave errors can arise from too much lyricism. Without taking too seriously what certain authors have written about the misunderstandings this famous bridal night has at times been responsible for, I was not prepared to challenge them.

We had been given a charming room. One of the walls sloped in very slightly. Two windows, small and clean, penetrated deep into the wall. The wallpaper with its sprays, some hangings and panels of printed cotton, and the furniture, made it seem almost as though we had been put up by friends in the attic of some ancient middle-class house. The place itself gave a kind of support or sympathetic justification to the rather too traditional situation in which we found ourselves.

I said to Lucienne : " The room's all right, I hope ? "

" Oh, yes ! I like it very much. It's just what I would have loved when I was living alone. Except that I can't quite see where the piano would go."

" Listen, dearest, for a couple of months now we have paid

all sorts of homage to convention. If that hasn't satisfied the djinn of society, nothing will. But we owe him nothing more. He has absolutely no programme to force on us. Agreed that we have just started off on what people call our honeymoon, and that more precisely, we are at the beginning of what is called our bridal night. Well, I'm not suggesting we pass it doing mathematical exercises, even though we like simplicity and are not out to astonish anyone, even ourselves. But you may very possibly be tired. You might possibly be thinking it very unpleasant, in spirit I mean, that love should so suddenly change its manner because the law provides a permit—Hm ? ”

I was looking at her. She had listened with no surprise, no confusion. She smiled slightly, attentive but impenetrable.

“ I wonder,” I continued, “ if we ought not to have become lovers somewhat earlier, for example, during the week in which you were working out our circular tour.” I paused : then added gaily : “ I apologize.”

Her lips, her eyelids trembled very slightly. “ I want to say something else. To sleep in the same bed as another person, and especially a man—leaving out everything else—needs, I quite understand a certain amount of adaptation, which has to come about gradually. Even merely to live with another person is no light matter, for it implies dozens and dozens of new reactions. And just because one began to live with someone else at five one afternoon, it is really going a bit fast to get to the physical promiscuity imposed by a four-foot bed by ten o'clock that night. For, at a guess, I should not give it more.”

She followed my eyes to the bed and laughed a little. As I was not too sure whether, by wanting to probe too far, I might not be making something of a fool of myself, I rather overstressed if anything my attitude of detachment and intellectual “ superiority.”

“ Of course, at bottom, all this is just a matter of form. In these ‘ quantum ’ theory days, one ought to be able to accustom oneself at very short notice to sleep with another.”

Lucienne's half-smile faded. “ She thinks me frivolous,” I thought to myself, “ jocular out of season, perhaps even pretentious.” I began again on the simplest, frankest note.

"Look here, dearest, any pleasures the person facing you, who happens to be still pretty callow, may have imagined or promised himself from to-day, are not to be any concern of yours. What you have to ask yourself is this: 'Do I, Lucienne, feel I want to spend this night too in tranquillity? My true comrade, now my companion, will surely manage to find a bed for himself on that sofa. It is really very comfortable for a sailor. And since he has been well brought up, he will go and smoke a cigarette downstairs while I get ready for the night. Later . . . well! later we shall see. Perhaps a day may come when it will seem charming for him to be in the room while I undress, or even for him to undress me.' "

Lucienne was looking at me. I had taken her hands. She smiled again. She even laughed. Then her lips trembled slightly. She offered them to me.

"How amusing you are, Pierre."

But it was rather a sort of troubled perplexity that the sound of her voice expressed.

"Do you mean by that, dear love, that you find me odd, preposterous?"

"Why no, as sweet as can be."

"I shall go and smoke my cigarette."

As she seemed uncertain how to reply, her face, her glance clouding over, I kissed her quickly and left the room.

I settled myself in a corner of the hotel drawing-room, not too much on edge, and on the whole pleased with myself. Some person, other than Lucienne, might have misunderstood my true feelings, and seen in my manner, my voice, an insulting absence of desire, or a too casual way of despatching our nuptial romance. Two months of familiarity however had made us very adept at sensing the most delicate motivations in each other. We already possessed the keys for understanding each other. Besides, whatever she might have known or thought of physical love, she was too perspicacious to doubt at all that the so-called irresistible passion of a husband, on his bridal night, belonged to the same order of observances as the engagement ring or offering of flowers, being less an homage to the chosen woman than to accepted ideas. At all events, it was not at that *pons asinorum* she awaited me. And I

felt sure she could not bear me a grudge for so completely putting her at her ease.

I made my absence last a good quarter of an hour. When I went up again, I knocked at the door of the room. I heard the word "Yes?" and the sliding of a bolt. I went in. Lucienne had backed softly away from the door towards the wardrobe facing it, and upright, turned to me, was leaning against it. She had put on a *négligé* which almost completely veiled her breasts and shoulders, endowing all her body with a proud suppleness. There was also a touch of powder and rouge on her face. The whole room was redolent of her perfume. She looked at me, or rather at where I was standing.

I moved forward. I kissed her hands. "You are very beautiful, Lucienne. My wife is a very beautiful woman."

I had said it slowly, with obvious, with naïve sincerity. Lucienne blushed with pleasure and lowered her eyes. As I bent again towards her to kiss her hands: "Listen," she said, almost in a whisper, "stay like that. Don't look at me. . . . I should be so ill at ease. Do you know that I have been thinking a lot about this moment."

"As if I had not been thinking about it even more, and more impatiently."

"No, you must not look at me. I must have the courage to tell you what I think. I am sure I could not say it to anybody but you, even though I were his wife. But you have so accustomed me to be sincere. . . . And also because it was so thoughtful of you to talk to me as you have just done——"

"Yes, dearest." (I was very anxious.)

"You see . . . I would have liked to have thought of it only in the way that others, I imagine, think of it, and let things happen of themselves. . . . I feel ashamed of myself rather——"

"Ashamed? Why ashamed?"

"Because I feel that if I said what I really thought, at this moment, to the other women that I know, they would look askance at me. Yes. They might even be shocked."

"Shocked, that would indeed surprise me. You will find by the time other women are talking to you, no longer as a young woman, but as a mature woman, that even then it is pretty difficult to shock them."

"You don't understand. It is not a question of their virtue, nor what they do, but of the importance they attach to . . . it. I, I am terrified by the importance I now attach to it, yes, now I get nearer to it. I keep on thinking perhaps it's not normal. . . . But why did you make me talk! . . ."

I was not sure what construction to put on her words or in what direction guide them. Her breast rose and fell with anxiety almost. I even began to fear her spirit had been overdriven, and that her emotions, in consequence, could not relax. I had gently drawn her by the hands to make her sit upon the sofa. And I sat down by her side without abandoning my tender and respectful attitude. I risked saying :

"An age-old wisdom does in effect will, that in matters of love, there should not be overmuch reflection, and that we are to relinquish ourselves. It is clearly one of the occasions when Nature asks only to be responsible for us. The moment one loves, everything becomes extremely simple. Have no fear. You will see."

And I smiled, caressing her hands.

"Pierre, you must understand. In the past, when sometimes I happened to think of marriage, I knew of course there was a physical side. But it seemed to me more a sort of accompaniment to the rest, not a simple detail of course, but an aspect, among others, of the new condition. And I go on assuring myself that that is the rational way of seeing it. But it is no longer what I feel. Now, when I think of it, when I repeat such words as 'marriage,' 'married,' or 'husband' (she lowered her head to say that word, and said it with such warmth in her voice that the accustomed words pierced me through and through) "I tell you it terrifies me a little."

"Terrified of what, my Lucienne?"

"Terrified of the way in which I feel those words. As if they meant nothing . . . " (at which moment a blush suffused her cheeks and she caught her breath, deliciously) "but that, as if one really married for that only, and that all the other things were merely the excuses." (She turned her head away as if to hide.)

"But do you realize that such thoughts, coming from you, are charming and intoxicating. And what do they prove?"

That you used to be a calm young woman, who thought rationally about things, and that now you are a dear, loving wife in the full flush of youth. Dearest little wife, so lovely, and so agitated, think, think that what you have just confided is what would most enchant a husband, a young and most amorous husband, to hear, and that I congratulate myself in having made you say it . . . because . . . clearly I could have realized it for myself. But nothing has been lost, and what counts is not so much hurrying, as not spoiling anything. It is a very precious thing for a man, always somewhat afraid of displeasing, to be so reassured. . . . Ah, my Lucienne, don't you realize that two such sentences, from your lips, are altogether more maddening than any amount of champagne."

I covered her shoulders with kisses. She smiled, somewhat relaxed, but did not look at me. Her emotion, profound, suffusing her cheeks, still possessed her, and finding no relief, attacked her spirit. She released herself a little. . . . "Pierre ! It makes me happy not to have too . . . too much surprised you. . . . But since I have dared to speak (How could I ?) I must not do it by halves . . . or it would have been better to say nothing. Listen. Since it is not too grotesque to attach so much importance to it, or to be unable, in all sincerity, to admit that at this moment there is anything else that counts, the feeling I have is that all my life I have been preparing meticulously for all sorts of things that had not a tenth of its importance, and that I have always accepted it as axiomatic, that the more important the matter was, the more careful the preparation that was needed for it. . . . Well and now, I tell myself I am not ready."

"But, dearest, why do you have to torment yourself with all this, and how do you know it is so ? No comparison or precedent has any relevance to what you feel now. This thing is unique, miraculously incomparable. And the lovely young woman that you are, comes to it altogether ready, though without knowing it, and miraculously prepared."

"I am so afraid of . . . getting a wrong impression, spoiling it for myself in fact."

"As if you could ! And as if, deep down, you were not ready. Why, all those rites of our engagement, to which with

such docility we adhered, are only rites of graduated intimacy, and so, in other words, of that very preparation. Humanity is not always as stupid as it seems."

She looked at me, then turned away her head. "How glad I am you are not ashamed of me for making you discuss such things. . . . I suspect those are the sort of things people avoid saying to each other. They do them, that is all. It is as though their spirits declared 'Do not force me to notice them. I shut my eyes.'"

She made a sudden movement. "Listen, Pierre. I believe this is really what I am thinking. That deeply, I believe I could not endure the physical act, even with you, if my feeling about it was that it was an indulgence, something tolerated by me. I feel I have got to say it all, for my own sake. You do see? Our union with each other . . ." (adding in a deep murmur) "the union of our bodies . . . is either so beautiful that there is nothing else in the world, or it is nothing, and I could not endure it. I am not the sort of woman who can make a pastime of it. I am not wanton in the least. If, while telling you the importance it had for me, I had felt you laughing or thinking 'Poor little thing! what a mountain to make out of something so ordinary,' I do not know but what I might have run away in tears."

I had dropped on my knees in front of her. She saw my glances light on her breasts, with desire and admiration, so beautiful was their outline and their rise and fall. She put her right hand up to her breast. At first that hand remained still, and her breath came short and fast. Then I saw that hand, which in some inexplicable way resembled her face, contract over her breast, crawl a little, hesitate, start off again; and at last with sudden decision and the suppleness of the hand of a musician, unfasten the neck of the robe, throw back the stuff, and disclose the shoulders. Then, determined not to stop, declining to hesitate, she untied the ribbon which held up her chemise, and helped by a movement of her body, made it slip along her arms at the same time as the robe. Her breasts issued from the frothing stuffs. I was so fearful still of startling her, that I managed to restrain the impulse that urged me towards that magnificent body.

And with the last movements of her body, that burning voice which had come to her said : " Husband ! Your Lucienne believes you. You have reassured her. She feels you have not lied, that she can trust in you, that with you she can enter into the kingdom of the flesh, fearing nothing, and with you become as one with it. Husband——"

And as she leant towards me, her hands touching my neck, her wonderful breasts pushing their points out at me, I buried my face in them in an ecstasy of enthusiasm so unegotistical, so impersonal almost, that it became almost an act of worship. I began to circumscribe their volume, to take into myself, to realize profoundly their shape ; I traced out the very sources and least divergences of their outlines with a compact girdle of kisses. Between two such chains of kisses, I passed over the whole of one breast with my tongue ; or I was in urgent haste to surround, suck up their points ; or all my mouth slid rapidly from one breast to the other in the wet track of kisses, and returning, stopped suddenly in the hollow between, pressing and moving over the tender hollow as if to make her breath of life, her blood, gush forth. And all the time I was telling myself that these two lovely breasts of Lucienne, so nobly offered, deserved better ; that my caresses were inadequate, that my kisses and tongueings called from her breast a gratitude too inadequate to satisfy her head and soul.

I took breath. I drew away my face. And while my hands caressed the flesh that my mouth had left, so that the chill of interrupted caresses might not come between us, I gazed. At moments, in order to remove all obstructions from my eyes, I took away my hands. The two breasts were ample, white with a darker tinge, perfectly moulded, admirably taut. In themselves they were a spectacle I could have gone on contemplating indefinitely. It was as though all haste had gone from me, all desire to possess, that I might be allowed to remain thus, kneeling in front of them, unable to look my full. Surely the most ancient sexual magic was working up my ecstasy. I cannot believe that any real man is capable of seeing the beautiful naked breasts of a young woman without a feeling of overwhelming astonishment, at once poignant and thrilling, which suspends all his faculties, wipes out every

opposing idea, and simplifies the universe remarkably, by substituting, in a halo of dazzling light, these tender twin idols. Why, even the frenzy such a sight may unloose, the kisses, the caresses, the furious movements of possession, is in its tumult standing no doubt for our determination to take possession of treasures whose inexplicable splendour defies us ; but also, it is a way of shaking off a burden of admiration too great.

But for me, kneeling before Lucienne's naked torso, many other forces, many other reasons, augmented that primeval spell. Those two miraculously finished breasts I admired as a wayfarer coming suddenly upon a Venetian square is struck with startled wonder at some cupola. I marvelled at them as a mathematician at some graph he had hardly believed possible. When there seemed a possibility of my ecstasy becoming too intellectual, their points, pink and brown, the colour of young shoots, slightly crinkled and uneven, shot a more animal provocation at me, suggesting those delights that work most deeply in us, the blindest crushings of the flesh by flesh. On which I felt new kisses fill all my mouth ; and my tongue and saliva prepare themselves for new and abundant caresses. But I looked at Lucienne's face. Its extreme loveliness was as though lit up by a glimmer of rosy light. Her eyes brimmed over with light. Her breath came through lips gently parted. But there was no trace of any contraction in her features, no trace of that interior torment of the individual by itself, nor of the kind of bestiality and malignancy which so often the carnal intoxication of the flesh marks upon a woman's face when the soul has momentarily abandoned it. Lucienne's face had never been more noble. Never had all her faculties been more present. Her own intoxication seemed like an exalted attentiveness. It was made clear to me that she who had offered me her breasts was not a sensualist, nor a vicious girl all nerves, hidden in Lucienne till then. It was Lucienne's self, in her entirety, proud, intelligent, perspicacious, my Lucienne, accustomed to the loftiest thoughts, my voyaging comrade, my friend of our long talks, my musician. And thinking thus, before those taut breasts whose points, as though groping, came back always to my lips, I was as though overwhelmed by the fury of gratitude that

suddenly swept through me. Every reason for adoring that flesh, for wanting to assuage my adoration on that flesh hurried forth so impetuously they could barely press through. I was raving with sheer gratitude. I really felt I must cry aloud. But I contented myself instead with pressing my lips to her body, and over all her breasts, and murmuring in a voice that panted, "darling, darling," as though honey mingled with my saliva.

Then, leaning over me, she said : " And *your* body, *yours*, my husband."

She tried to unbutton my collar, divest me of my clothes. I gave what help I could, clinging to her with my mouth. She made me half stretch along the sofa, and stretched out too. She had succeeded in baring my neck and breast. And without the expression of her face or her breathing changing in any way, or any impure or lustful shadow flitting over the luminosity of her face, she began slowly to snuff at my body, feeling it delicately with her lips but without going so far as to kiss. Repeatedly she came back to the same places. She seemed to be learning, assimilating slowly, with the whole of time before her, newnesses of inexhaustible interest.

She had reached my shoulder, the hollow of my arm. Now her breathing came more irregular and more forced. And as though groping, her face and nostrils entered more deeply under my arm. It was as though she discovered a spring. She drank in the odour of her husband and was intoxicated by it. I felt a kiss begin to form, the lips flower, the tongue swell and touch my flesh. She too was possessed by her need to thank the flesh thus offered to her. But she fell away a little, and threw her head back, sighing : " Enough for this evening, Pierre. I can't bear any more. Above all, you mustn't mind. I need to sleep now. I shall fall asleep thinking of you, only you."

She shut her eyes and drew a deep breath through her nostrils.

My ecstasy did not blind me. I realized I must do nothing to get more from Lucienne. I supported her to her bed, kissed her eyes and lips, and yet again, but without violence, her breasts. Then I pretended to have to look for something in our boxes. I went to the other end of the room. She could undress at her ease and get into bed.

When she saw me busy turning the sofa into a bed she said :
" You won't be able to sleep."

" I am used to sleeping anywhere. Besides, I should be delighted not to sleep."

She smiled and shut her eyes, and again drew a deep slow breath through her nostrils.

The morning of the next day we spent visiting the town. Lucienne seemed happy. But she spoke little and seemed little interested in all the things around her.

In discussing our journey, we had thought of leaving Rouen that very evening, supposing we had got a fair idea of it. But as we should have to give notice at the hotel towards noon, I asked her what she had decided.

Her eyes sought mine. A touch of the rosy flame of the evening reappeared in her face. She seemed pondering and somewhat moved.

" When do we leave ? "

" At five, I believe."

" We should have to finish our sight-seeing this afternoon, then ? "

" Yes, and even so, we should have seen very little. Let us stay till to-morrow."

I felt that deferring our departure thus was a relief to her. During lunch, I tried, without directly questioning her, to discover what she really wanted.

" Since there is no hurry now, we can rest a little before we start out to see the town again."

And while she agreed, her glance seemed to be saying :
" Why do we not have the courage to confess that this town, these monuments, the rest of our trip, are all sublimely indifferent to us, that the one thing that matters is to find ourselves again as soon as possible in our new kingdom of the flesh ? As if we had thought of anything else all this morning ? As if it were possible to go on waiting ! "

Making the need for rest the excuse, I let Lucienne go first to our room. A touch of superstition made me repeat my

rite of the evening, and kept me waiting below a quarter of an hour.

I found her apparelled and adorned as in the evening. Very simply she came and sat upon the sofa. I knelt at her feet.

She unfastened the neck of her robe. Her admirable breasts surged forth, advancing towards me. In a few moments, with the rapidity of a tidal wave, my ecstasy rose to its former level again. I repeated all my acts of idolatry to Lucienne's body. There was an immense need in me to bring an even greater zeal to them, make them express more, if that were possible. I who had so often been an impetuous and eager male, inclined more to use the woman according to my own impulses than to concern myself with her capricious pleasure had now no haste at all. Not only did I adore Lucienne's flesh, but her wishes, her whims as well. I would let myself be led by her, through her flesh and through mine, as slowly and by such detours as she pleased, till her body should be joined to mine; a union which for me too, was becoming of such significance, so charged in advance with so much emotion and such intensity of pleasure, that it would have seemed madness to me to have to cut short our preparations, so delicious in themselves.

I, the man with experience, who a day earlier even might have thought himself on the road to becoming *blasé*, when had I ever suspected that the "things of the flesh," could happen on such a plane and without any need of artifice, because a young woman, whom her very purity and a sort of genius aided, had looked them in the face and attentively gauged their depths? At most, I had had some slight presentiment of it in the company of that mistress of whom I have spoken. Her buttocks and her breasts, so magnificently loading our bed, or tossing me on wild billows, had already drawn me beyond mere voluptuousness to the brink of a religion of the flesh. But I had ventured in that direction with a bad conscience. That religion as I glimpsed it, seemed accursed and troubled. I felt myself sliding into a world inferior to the world I knew (infernal in its original sense). The intoxication I had had from it was far from reassuring. I was always expecting that terribly clear-sighted awakening that Baudelaire so well expresses.

Instead of that sexual fever, so fundamentally bitter and

inimical to me, what Lucienne communicated, as if I sucked it from her breasts, was an eagerness which no constraint upon the spirit made alarming. It would not have feared to stand comparison with those states of consciousness which we most esteem for their intellectual content, their subject or their source.

Thus, it has seemed to me, occasionally in my life, to know what sublimity feels like. Kneeling in front of Lucienne, full of pride to see that face to which my homage of adoration mounted from the caresses I lavished on her breasts, what seems to come back most clearly now is not the banal urgency of desire, but this same feeling of sublimity.

When she in her turn had laid bare my chest, and slowly brushed her lips against my skin and smelt at it, and taken that long deep breath, I feared lest for a moment she might suddenly need to rest as on the night before. I watched her face. After seeming to withdraw, it came to life again. It seemed clear then that we could now leave the uncomfortable sofa without breaking the charm. Half guiding, half supporting her, I led her to the bed.

She made me stretch out by her side. She pressed her two hands softly against my head. I felt she was guiding my head below her breasts, that she was inviting me to continue my exploration of her body. While one of her hands rested upon the nape of my neck, directing me from moment to moment with imperceptible pressures, her other hand little by little pushed aside her clothes. Thus I came to her waist, to the nascent curve of her hips and belly. I amused myself by tracing a ring of caresses about it, the turns and twists of which, packed closely, intermingled. My kisses lingered in receding tender regions of flesh. My mouth, my tongue, which unresistingly they welcomed and swallowed almost, seemed to cling there. No effort I felt was needed to imagine that a certain penetration of our bodies had already taken place, and two feeble cries which broke from her, revealed she felt that also.

The clothes continued to slide away, following my kisses. Was it I who hurried slightly, or was I but obeying Lucienne? Her nudity spread more rapidly, like a brushwood fire when the wind rises. I came to the borders of her most feminine flesh. Already I could sense its perfume, that perfume

which has since become as familiar and friendly as her very voice, but which then I breathed for the first time.

Lucienne pressed my face with her hand as though to beg it to have the strength to move away. I yielded. With a long caress that passed over all her body, gliding over the valley of her breasts, I went to seek her lips.

While I was prolonging my kiss, she had succeeded finally in throwing off her clothes. I abandoned her lips in order to contemplate her body naked. Its extreme beauty could not surprise me, for it issued from all the ideas I had conceived of it, as a geometric figure from the points that determine it. Of that perfect nudity I had made the necessary mental picture even before my glance could verify it.

Yet the sight so inspired me, so completely satisfied my spirit with all the joys of proof, so abundantly fulfilled my state of veneration, that a new and almost furious zeal to caress her took possession of me. But I thought I felt in her the need for a pause. I restrained myself, the better to look at her, the better to caress her only with my eyes. A caress which, perhaps, was more difficult for her to bear bravely than any other. Her body seemed to gather itself together, to hide itself away. Her face turned from me, seeking some refuge. She closed her legs tightly. And hid her belly with her hand. But far from giving way to this fresh attack of modesty, I think she must almost have blamed herself for it as though it were a weakness, a disloyalty to the kingdom of the flesh.

"Look," she said, forcing her voice somewhat, "look well at your wife" . . . (she added, smiling, the better to conquer herself) "your shameless wife."

With a gesture, that her will forced from her, she moved her hand from her belly. But the effort she made over herself made her shudder. Her hand began the gesture of hiding again.

Softly I placed three kisses on the tender flesh.

She was still trembling.

"Do you know," I said to her, "that it is not possible to be more beautiful than you."

As though in gratitude, or to escape her confusion, she put her arms round my neck and kissed me many times. Then she turned again to my body, multiplying her caresses, as if it was

now her turn to acknowledge and venerate. The rites she followed were similar to mine, descending the length of my body as she pushed aside my clothing by degrees.

But despite my great happiness I felt a certain fear. Would not the sudden sight of male desire, in all its naïve brutality, produce on an undoubtedly inexperienced woman, if not a feeling of absurdity—she was too carried away to think of absurdity—at least one of violent, bestial ugliness, which might wake her out of that marvellous intoxication, in which, since yesterday, she had been sunk with me. I wondered whether it would not be wiser, and altogether natural, to give way to an excitement which I had no need to feign, and come to the act of possession with no further delay.

But this ordeal, besides exciting my sensuality, intrigued me just because of the risk attached to it. I told myself also, that for a mentality like mine, which even in its ravings remained mathematical, such an escape would be equivalent to cheating over the answer to a problem. Since I had followed Lucienne thus far, and with what enthusiasm, in her progressive discoveries in the "things of the flesh," was it elegant, in the intellectual sense of the word, to slide out at a critical moment.

But it was too late now. Lucienne who had with the same movement both unbared and exposed me, drew back her face. I was infinitely anxious. She had, it is true, not recoiled brusquely, nor turned away her eyes, which on the contrary seemed to have become ardent, and grave. Suddenly she dropped her head against my own, buried her face in the shadow of mine, and whispered in my ear, a whisper which kept all her voice's ardour.

"Husband!"

I pressed her shoulders to me. She added, speaking very slowly, with much emotion: "Listen. There are some things which I have never understood but which I understand so well now. You know . . . I read (yes, one can be chaste and yet have read that sort of thing) that among certain ancient peoples the women adored the male organ and made it an object of worship. And I am not saying that I was shocked. But for me it was as strange, as buried deep in primitive madnesses as the sacrifice to Moloch in Salammbo. Well——"

"Well?"

"Well . . ." (she buried her face deeper, trembling from top to toe) "well ! I did not know it could be . . . yes, so beautiful, have such a kind of impatient, terrible beauty. When you gazed at my breasts yesterday, I shall remember the ardour you showed then all my life. And now I feel something equally strong. I resent it in me, not having the courage to bear witness to it as you did . . . not yet that courage. . . . But I too adore" (the word swelled with all the ardour which issued undulating from her breasts) . . . "I am possessed by adoration, like some woman of the past."

She was breathless. Her heart was striving with itself. I finished getting off my clothes.

"One kiss at least," she said.

Quickly she flung one fearful kiss as at an idol's feet, then threw herself back, drawing me down upon her.

A drunken cry burst from her throat, a prolonged even burst of sound, half moan, half shriek. It would have sufficed to tear the passion from me, even if my unsurpassable excitement had permitted me to retard it.

I am not very pleased with the preceding pages. I have at various times attempted to modify them, but with little success.

It is not because I have any real difficulty in committing facts of this nature to writing, though most people reserve them for their secret meditations, since the vagueness of everyday thought does in effect help to make them much less urgent.

I am not leaving aside the sentiment of modesty. But it is, on the contrary, in the daily (non-technical) exercise of thought that I would rather experience it, or again in social expressions of thought. For instance, I am much less generally free with my tongue than certain of my colleagues. I do not give utterance to what are called "obscenities" except in comparatively rare cases and among special friends.

But when as in this work, my thought assumes a technical aspect, my sense of modesty vanishes. I do not have to overcome it. The question does not arise.

But would it not reappear if I thought I was going to be read? Probably. Unless I had the means to sift my readers. But that is not the question.

No. What does not much please me, and what I have vainly tried to ameliorate in this chapter (which I shall call, for simplicity sake, the Bridal Night) is the tone in which it is written. Before writing it, when I was thinking about it, the difficulties as I foresaw them were not of this kind. It seemed to me that it ought to be possible to relate events of such an order, almost as tranquilly as a physicist would record some patient experiment. But now I perceive that the tone which, despite myself, I have adopted, is a literary one, much more closely related to a novel than a monograph.

After the first draft, it seemed to me that I had let myself be carried away, and that by revising these pages with detachment and severity, I should without too great difficulty strip them of their literary veneer. The tone which displeased me seemed merely adventitious, like a colour which has merely to be scraped off, or at the worst, a chemical dye which is a more difficult but not impossible matter to eliminate. After a number of attempts I have had to admit that the tone in question was "ineradicable," like certain colouring matters which cannot be either suppressed or modified other than by disintegrating the molecular structure of the coloured body.

Yes, it is futile to want to scrape off or precipitate elsewhere like a pigment the emotion, the exaltation, the pathos, etc. . . . which disappoint and annoy me in these pages, and which in addition are responsible for all its immodesty, if immodesty there be. It is not to be found in this or that epithet. The vibration of love, whose effects I have sought to work out, is part and parcel of the happenings I describe. It can only be diminished by lowering the whole temperature of the happening, which would be equivalent to converting the event itself into something else.

An observation which leads me to what follows : the tone I would have liked to keep, and which I cannot help regretting still, may not be applicable as applied to man, except at certain very low temperatures, of events. We must resign ourselves to seeing it changed through and through, when the molecular vibrations of such events are tenfold magnified. In other words, the scientific attitude would perhaps be the not insisting in such cases on maintaining a so-called scientific tone. And it

may be that literary tone, when it is "ineradicable" or sincere (to distinguish it from the false literature of "veneer") is only an unrecognized condition of the scientific tone. That is at least what I should like to believe, in order to reassure myself.

I also reproached myself for something else, the excess of detail. While admitting the necessity for establishing the character of this "bridal night," in order to illuminate ulterior events and place them correctly on the graph—and nobody could, I think, dispute this: would not a more summary description have been just as satisfactory, or a more abstract interpretation? When there is so much emphasis, it looks very much as if the pleasure experienced in the matters treated of, is not a purely speculative one.

There too, I have tried to modify my text. I took a certain paragraph, as for example the description of the caressing of Lucienne's breasts. I tried time and time again to simplify it, then to restate it in abstract formulae. I have proved that I cannot escape these alternatives; either the eradicating of the particular qualities of the event in simplifying it, and so reducing it to so common a situation that there is no point in mentioning it (so that, by degrees, everything would be suppressed) or else the condensing of its meaning into one or more formulae, no longer able to provide their own justification, or, at the worst, be understood: (like finding in the papers of some scholar merely the record of an undescribed experiment). In any case, I had in the first place to think about the details I was trying to evade; and in order to think seriously about them, think them in writing. Thus, there was no way of getting out of it. As for a method which would imply destroying my first draft in order to keep only its resumé or conclusions, that seems to me contemptible, and altogether in opposition to the general spirit of this book, as to which I said, when I began it, that it would be an original work, a piece of research, and not a derivative or expository work.

A last objection distresses me. I set myself this task of writing because I felt a need to elucidate certain important and singular facts within my experience. It is understood that I am still dealing with what led up to them, their antecedents in fact. And I see more and more clearly that there was no way of getting at them straight away.

But do I not seem to be attaching both importance and uniqueness in one and the same breath, to what were, after all, very ordinary circumstances? To start out so circumstantially, so like an arctic explorer, merely to make a discovery like this "bridal night," has its rather funny side. For as you know, such things do not get talked of every day, though they are done every day. Many of the details I have so carefully set down are current coin. They are to be found in thousands of other "bridal nights," if those concerned would only bear witness. Am I not very naïve to want to mount them on pins?

It is a criticism which affects me painfully, considering my character (a very moderate degree of naïveté, and not the least desire to exploit it).

I could reply in the first place that I know absolutely nothing of what happens on other "bridal nights." What I have read about them has taught me little. The sole means of comparison at my disposal were furnished by my own amorous experience. From that point of view, the only one that counts for me, my "bridal night" was indeed something new.

But I must find the courage to say frankly what I think. Deep in my heart, I am convinced that that particular "bridal night" was out of the ordinary, not as regards its acts of course, but in its spirit. I am convinced that Lucienne's attitude was altogether out of the ordinary, and that the remarkable nature of the events which succeeded it had one of its roots in that attitude.

If my story does not give that impression, it is my complete incompetence as a writer which is responsible, and that is all. It is not enough to have lived through extraordinary happenings, nor to appreciate the fact to be able to set them down.

I perceive however that I am not using the words "extraordinary," "strange" in their most usual sense. The writers of adventure stories and American films have played the very smallest part in the formation of my character. (Refer to my docket.)

VI

THIS first fusion of our bodies had precipitated such a mass of emotion, and in itself had been so altogether complete, that to have repeated it the same day would have been most unskilful. Lucienne could only desire to rest. In order that the act should preserve the high significance with which she had charged it, and by its unique success influence our subsequent physical relations, that event and that event only would have to dominate over a wide realm of reminiscence.

Without even consulting Lucienne, I had a folding bed moved into the room. In this way I spared her the thought that my consideration for her would cost me another sleepless night.

The next morning, we set out again on our sight-seeing. Lucienne was tender, captivating, and seemed in no way pre-occupied. I thought to myself that her mysticism of the flesh had perhaps melted away in the positive joys of possession, and that the ecstatic virgin seemed to be coming to herself as an excellent sensuous spouse. And for a husband that too was felicity to be grateful for. But I regretted my enchanted universe of the evening.

We visited some monuments, the older parts of the town, the wharves, where I drew Lucienne's attention to various points in some of the ships. We talked together, like two very old friends. At times a glance, the pressure of her arm, her hand, reminded me she was also my wife.

As we were walking up the slope of a wharf, she bent towards me and said, almost in a whisper : " What do you think of me, Pierre ? "

I looked at her, surprised.

" . . . that I have become very matter of fact again ?——"

I sought for an answer. She continued, forcing herself to be assured, compelling herself to look me in the face.

" Do you want us very much to take the afternoon train ? "

"Not the least in the world. Particularly if——"

She blushed and seemed confused. I stopped to kiss her. Then we walked a few steps in silence.

"You know, last night, I could have died without a murmur."

It was said so unemphatically that the possibility of smiling, or being anxious even, did not occur to me. It sounded impressive as an act of faith.

"After all," she added eagerly, "it would be rather cowardly not to dare to confess it to one's husband."

"And so much more pleasant for him than to hear a confession of disappointment."

"Are there really many women who feel disappointed?"

"So it is said."

She meditated for a moment, then: "It is hardly credible that life accords us this thing. I have never seen life in sombre colours, but that it should have so much to give us, and without being asked . . . so to speak."

"Without being asked? O! . . . Imagine some woman with no ardour at all in your place. . . . The heart's contribution is of great importance. Even the spirit's too."

"Of course. But not because the spirit artificially works itself up. Oh no. Just thinking about it honestly, just freely admitting it, suffices. Not making a point of deprecating it. Nor pretending to gibe at it either through false shame."

Some minutes later she had switched the talk back to the small events of our walk. She did everything so naturally, so simply that the transition was hardly perceptible. And having found the courage to speak of our embraces, she would with the utmost simplicity sandwich one of her love thoughts between her comments on our walk.

I must say here, that in this way, in all innocence, she compounded the most stimulating aphrodisiac possible for me. Neither languid airs, nor teasing charms would have excited me so much. They would have made her seem too like a mistress. I should have thought, though with pleasure, "Here's a sweet creature who is not doing so badly in her new occupation, and what is more, seems beginning to like it." Whereas every time Lucienne spoke, a voice in me answered, obstinately, crazily, with madness: "What are you doing

here? What are you thinking of? You are all behindhand. You will never manage to deserve being this woman's man. This simply adorable woman's man. Even if you gave up every hour of your day to the adoration of her body you would still be its ungrateful servitor. How can you endure for her body at this very moment to be so bereft of caresses, and for her, nevertheless, to thank you as she does. Stop those words of thanks. Make them turn the moment you can into that breath without words, then into that moaning-shriek of yesterday. It is the only thanks you need have no shame in accepting. Lucienne's slave. A slave, too richly rewarded, when her warmth transpierces him. The bed waits."

Like lightning my spirit circumscribed the globe, without difficulty finding every justification for its frenzy. Where could I find, outside myself, a more suitable idol than that body of Lucienne, perfect as the most perfect creation, miraculously united to the thought of Lucienne, to the nobility of Lucienne, to the devotion of her ardour, to the elegance of her thanks, or where find something in which for better reasons to lose myself, or more willingly sacrifice myself and be destroyed?

Thus it was we spent three days more in Rouen. And spontaneously the three days fell into the following routine. Morning, a walk like the one I have described. Ordinary remarks, where at some particular moment the love thought would issue and thereafter twine about us. In myself, first a benign excitement, which however, with the passing moments, became more difficult to control. I succeed by the growing power, not of accustomedness, but of our ritual. My desire to enslave myself to a sort of ceremonial goes on growing.

The afternoon was passed in our room, in the "kingdom of the flesh." We always entered into and explored it along the same paths, and always scrupulously repeated the gestures that had gone before. Nevertheless I spent less time on the opening caresses, in order to get to the concluding ones, with which we had just become acquainted. I made their elaborations close more rapidly round that carnal redoubt that explains and determines all a woman's body, and from which shines

forth, in the eyes of men, all its sacred character. Even the breasts do but elaborate, as magnificent objects in space, some of that beauty which concentrates in the groove of the sexual organ like an incorporeal essence.

But chiefly it was the very act of possession which was prolonged without any falling away from its highest, most ardent level.

The third day, a half-hour having passed in which she seemed altogether rapt, with closed eyes that seemed more like profound meditation in the accomplished embrace than a swoon, it was clear to me that when she came to herself, Lucienne would hardly be able to resign herself to a new separation of our bodies. With further caresses, I gently entered into her. We remained thus for more than an hour possibly. I avoided all movement. At times a very slight throbbing of my flesh communicated itself to hers. Or else it was her flesh which tenderly contracted on my own, as one hand squeezes another. To maintain the union of our bodies, all we kept was the minimum of vibration and hold upon ourselves that was needed to make it seem both a permanent function of our organisms, and the paradisaal state normal to our spirits.

At evening we would go into some public place, like a café. We looked at the people. Lucienne spoke little. She was altogether preoccupied by that new world which she shared with me. When I said, "What are you thinking of?" she would make this sort of reply, "Of that man and woman over there; or rather, of what my thoughts would once have been, and how insignificant they were. A man and a woman I would see entering a place like this together. I could only imagine the tie that linked them so very feebly. And now it seems to me so strong. All that has to happen is for the woman to smile a little as she looks at him, or for him to let his eyes wander over her body."

When our journey began again, it became difficult to go on with our rites. From time to time, however, we took care to reserve an afternoon for our "kingdom of the flesh." But at other times a more restricted role had to content it. To pick

out our moments and gauge them, I let myself be guided by Lucienne's inclinations, though striving always to observe these two rules, which seemed to me important, and which I found at times difficult in reconciling : never to let a day pass without some act of homage to the body of my wife ; carefully to avoid anything which might make our love life assume a mechanical rhythm (ritual and mechanical repetition being worlds apart) ; and in particular to forego the act of possession whenever lack of time, fatigue, or difficulty of any kind risked turning it into something to be hurried over. My desire was that " the fusion of the flesh " which Lucienne had so miraculously awaited and then welcomed, should in her eyes remain an integral part of a state of supreme grace in the living body.

For her too, it was important. Indeed, she seemed to fear as much as myself, and in a still more tenderly superstitious manner, lest a day should pass without a visit to our " kingdom of the flesh." But when circumstances did not permit more, she would choose some single caress and charge it with all her fervour.

In this month of travel, I finally convinced myself that to have considered Lucienne as a "sensual" woman in the ordinary meaning of the term, would have been a bad error, and that any husband who had treated her as such, would have thrust her infallibly into the disgust of physical love. This for me made it a subject of frequent meditation, and astonishment also. The spectacle of Lucienne amorous interested the intellect, I might even say, claimed its interest. Any ardent, affectionate man incapable of building up a new system of mental images in harmony with another's, would have committed some fatal error where she was concerned.

During one of these amorous interludes, which lasted all an afternoon, the most ordinary lack of discernment (the average male's degree of perception) was all that would have been needed to make one think (but in self-felicitation) that one had married a woman of ardent temperament, who got the most out of her sensations, and was at all times ready to vary them, being not only amenable to experiment, but adventurous too, and at times enterprising ; able in fact to come, by gradual stages rising in an uninterrupted crescendo, to a discharge of

sensuality which would then leave her, for fifteen minutes or half an hour, inert upon the bed.

I am assuredly not going to pretend that Lucienne did not experience the most exquisite pleasure, nor that she attached little importance to it. I am positive that sensuality in her became as urgent, and was accompanied by as much satisfaction, as in the most sensual of women. But it was never sensation as such that Lucienne sought. It was not by indulging in carefully graduated sensations nor by discounting the furious final orgasm of pleasure, that for hours at a time she found strength to put aside all lassitude, and to call up an amorous enthusiasm which never let her down in the middle of a carousal or in passing from one to the other. Besides, even if she had from the very outset made real efforts to daunt her modesty, whenever that modesty threatened to inhibit some ardent impulse, she made no effort to outrage herself. Gestures, attitudes, were never daring or accepted by her merely as a means of procuring that extra pleasure which consists in saying, "I could never have imagined myself acting in that way!" or "If people saw me doing what I did!" She took no revenge on her chastity as a girl, nor for the restraints imposed by custom. She was in no wise wanton.

When that was once understood, the attitudes and movements of Lucienne in the love act, her humilities or her initiatives could be interpreted and related to each other unambiguously. The barriers too could be perceived, and also Lucienne's originality as a lover. For instance, Lucienne would never have thought of taking up, and it would have been maladroit to try and make her, any position whatever whose object was obviously the renewal, or heightening, of a purely local sexual pleasure, or the emphasizing of its immodesty. But to make up for it, she would joyfully rediscover and from choice find again, some other attitude, in appearance just as voluptuous, but which accorded with her ideas of love, or even seemed to provide a dramatic, exceptionally eloquent setting for it.

Thus I learnt, as Lucienne's husband, what none of my mistresses had allowed me to suspect, that in the vast universe of amorous practices, two great categories exist which are almost strangers to each other, though confounded in the

common mind and totally condemned by the enemies of the flesh. And in truth, certain practices do seem common to both categories. But it is possible to maintain that that is so only in appearance, and that the animating spirit profoundly distinguishes one from the other.

On the one hand, you have those practices which make up what might be called the technique of sexual pleasure, lovers or spouses behaving, in fact, as though they had formed an association for mutual aid. Their pleasure is greater, or more joyful, because of each other, than if they had been alone. Their relation is determined by the laws of reciprocity. The pleasure experienced by each is the end and explanation of their every embrace. With an imaginativeness approximating to that of the third-rate inventor, they vary their squeezings, rubbings and angles of attack with a definite end in view. The happy construction of the sexual organs results generally in pleasure being felt while communicating it to another. Where such reciprocity happens not to be simultaneous, the divergence is a slight one. Each egotism relies on the honesty of the other. Add too that the sight of or contact with another's pleasure encourages the feeling of it in oneself, and that a considerable dose of generosity, of uncalculating sympathy, may even creep in.

On the other hand there are the practices which belong to a sort of sexual religion, perhaps inherited from the remotest ages, perhaps always being reinvented and reconstructed anew by such souls as are capable of enduring their ardour and fanning their flame. This religion rests on two main ideas : that the idea of the fusion of bodies constitutes an immense mystery, which far surpasses the ordinary mechanisms of life, and borders on the supernatural ; and the idea that the adoration of the flesh of the opposite sex, when that has the freshness and magnificence implied in the terms youth and beauty, is the medium by which men can adore an obscure but real godhead, hidden in that living flesh, and that the difference in the sexes is employed by such godhead to offer to each of us a close and material idol (provisory too, possibly).

Lucienne, amorous, in all her gestures, all her attitudes, exhaled this religion which she had refound for herself. She

would not withhold even the most daring caress if she could see in it a new more vibrant way of adoring the flesh of her spouse. But to have suggested some other caress in which not all her desire to please could have seen anything but a demand for keener sensation, or obscene pastime, would have been pointlessly to shock her, and perhaps for ever cast her from her state of grace. In the act of possession itself, she would favour everything that was in harmony with the mystery of the fusion of the flesh. But that husband who, in error as to the nature of her ardour, might have tried to draw her into the pure phantasies of sensuality would have felt her suddenly frozen in his arms.

All of which explains also the nature of the general impression to which I was subject at this time. The repetition, the length of our amorous séances, the nervous energy and emotion expended by me in them, added to the fatigues of our voyage, might at times have exhausted me. Or else, I might at certain moments have been afflicted by a secret shame, been nauseated by the carnal joys offered in such profusion. Without going so far, I might have reflected that I had every justification for taking advantage of circumstances which life does not scatter broadcast, above all so very satisfactorily, yet that nevertheless, the spirit's holidays could not go on for ever, and that I should have to count on its indulgence not too much to question myself when it should resume its normal course within me.

But I did not feel anything of the kind. There were never any depressions to surmount, nor secret disgusts. My ardour remained constant, my optimism stable and manifest. At any moment I was ready to love Lucienne ; and the bed stretched before me always like an inviting salubrious land. I did not feel either that I was menaced in any way by the possibility of being pulled up short by the spirit, for the simple reason that it never seemed to have been outside me nor to counter-suggest withholding myself. Briefly, as far as the spirit was concerned I was at peace. My activities in no way embarrassed it. It was clear to me I was sliding down no slope. I thought of those debauchees, who from the depths of their abandonment, live in expectation of some angelic redemption, and hope the better to merit it by the humiliations they impose

upon themselves. I brought to mind those famous encounters of the body and soul which are said to have made real victims. I did not smile. But I saw no signs of encounter or victim in myself.

I am not neglecting one factor, and that is that we were man and wife. Even the shrewdest of us who, with a clear conscience can laugh at the registrar and all he stands for, does not, deep down, attach any particular value to what in a marriage is judicial convention, ceremonial, legal or administrative sanction ; but it may be he is more impressed than he knows by society's weighty approbation, of which these forms are the symbols. To feel that society in all its vastness, and callous as it is to individual joys, blesses your rut and orgasms, encourages them even, takes count of them, prepared to be astonished almost by their moderation, is no small thing, however much one may care to think so. Besides, once a certain outer zone of comic situations and galling ideas has been passed, the position of "newly-married" couples does seem suddenly to assume a certain grandeur in the social scheme. It is as though society encircled them, both isolating and protecting them, spurring them on by signs and with cries, "Fling yourselves on each other, splendid male, glorious female ! Clasp close, dig deep, wildly, madly ! Sate yourselves with each other, with every part of you ! Nothing is now prohibited ! Panting, we share your joys !" That it may be, is as stimulating to our deepest selves, as provocative to the young couple as the arena surrounded by the crowd, empty except for bull and toreador. And so long as the spell lasts, can there be any question of remorse, or lassitude ?

I have not the stupidity (so very facile) to underestimate it. And I can find nothing objectionable, all said and done, in thinking that to the loins of the newly married this extra potency is added. As far as our conjugal adventure and its subsequent progress is concerned, I acknowledge that a certain fundamental conception of marriage, which includes the social aspects of that idea, was at no time far from Lucienne's mind. I, however, was hardly at all prepared to be affected by it, while in the first weeks of our life together that feeling of plenitude which I have already mentioned, owed immensely

more to the sort of religion of sex which was in process of reinvention about me. I became involved in its radiations. And there was no need to come to any decision in the matter, since already I had conformed to it. Its demand was less for spiritual agreement than for acts, agreeable and exhilarating. But my spirit had nothing against them, for the new perspectives seemed enticing enough. It glimpsed also a vague possibility of revenge against the biological ideas that had so driven it some months earlier. But it was obvious I had not time to get that clear. And in the train, tenderly looking into Lucienne's eyes, or surfeiting my eyes on some inflexion of her body, on certain meeting points or vanishings of its lines, I had no thoughts for the investigation of any problem. But I sensed a recurrence of confidence and hope which I can find no words for.

Phrases like "Lucienne's flesh," "woman's flesh," "within-flesh," "loved, beloved-flesh," took me as it were by the nape of the neck and forced me towards the body facing me, as though even the most secret of her folds held in upwelling intimacy and warmth the magical counter-charm which could thrust back the thought that, three months earlier, had grown so rapidly under my eyes, making my universe an illimitable waste.

The influence of that religion of sex I gauged now by the manner in which "the cult of woman" had taken possession of my spirit. In the past, the words alone were enough to irritate me. I saw in them either a trivial form of literary expression, or the sentimentalism of some cheap ballad-monger, the baseness of the male twisting under his desire and too pitiful to satisfy it; and at the worst, the expression of a physiological gratitude, moving enough, but on a par for intellectual quality with one's acceptance of one's stomach.

Now I was not satisfied merely to practice the cult, I had got to the point of attributing an obvious potency of compulsion to it. A woman's body, with all that implies, all its beauty in flower, weighted with all its sexual attributes; feminine, female in every part (not a curve, not a surface, from head to toe over which the conception of femininity is not unctuously spread) could not in my imagination provide a relation between

man and woman more spontaneous than that of adoration. I saw therein an obedience comparable, though much more complex, with that of intelligence in relation to geometric truth. In either case, he who was subject to it was not free to withhold himself.

The preceding remarks, and the tone in which they are written, may create an impression that all through this period my critical faculties were suspended, and that my intelligence served merely to annotate my passion. I do not say that my capacity to make unprejudiced judgments remained unimpaired. But I still retained my liberty of thought. And if, as is possible, my conclusions were already formulated, the meditations which were responsible for them retained an appearance of impartiality.

At times (false dawn for instance, when I had a touch of insomnia, or a few hours later when dressing) I would inevitably remind myself : " As seen by another, and dispassionately, this whole account would be immensely simplified. It is the classical love situation. When a man is in the throes of a sexual crisis, everyone knows that his whole being must take part in the dance. There can be no love without some mental phantasmagoria. And since you, personally, have a certain intellectual make-up, you will get worked up about quite different things than a draper's assistant (or an elegiac poet or a young lady of good family) ; but in itself it is of no importance. You are wild about Lucienne in a way that so far you have never been about any other woman. Your legitimate wife happens for the moment to be the most exciting, the most absorbing mistress you ever had. In fact, it's a bit of luck. Make the most of it while it lasts. But do not lie to yourself, or give occasion to the man you were, and will soon or late become again, to laugh at you for all this sexual mysticism."

I added : " Your mental phantasmagoria is in any case only the reflection of Lucienne's. It is in her that the phenomenon is of interest. And can you not see how easy it is to explain ? Lucienne has come to marriage in a state of purity (both physically and even imaginatively) which is very uncommon. Besides which, the distinction of her spirit is highly superior

to the average. Which results in a remarkably pure form of modesty, difficult to overcome. It is only silly prudery that gives way at the first blow. Again, she is by nature sensual. And without being aware of it, she brought to the nuptial couch the endowments of the *grande amoureuse*. Could she, in her own eyes, accept that immediately, and without detours of any kind satisfy an appetite which for so many reasons might surprise or even shock her? That was why she had to concoct for herself a myth that would justify it. And as a result she has found a means for permitting herself (and permitting you too) quite a number of the phantasies of sensuality without issuing from her myth. It seems to her, when she bestows or receives some particularly daring caress which very definitely assuages her, that a sort of sacred drama is being enacted at that moment. And thus it is that there must be beautiful and ardent Christian spouses (you had not taken them into account) who are able to make their consciences recommend quite a supplement of voluptuous acts : as telling themselves, for instance, that if one goes to a great deal of trouble for a child after its birth, one must not proceed too miserly when it is only still a matter of its conception, or even of a simple design thereto, or a preliminary exercise. After all, it is charming. Only imbeciles could find reason to complain. Would you rather, because of your liking for absolute mental coherence, that Lucienne had said—" Pooh, and is that love ? "

Fundamentally such an interpretation could not be anti-pathetic to me. Even if it somewhat upset my recent lover's lyricism, it gratified something much more ancient in me, which was my particular turn of mind. And if one has not been born sentimental, what gratifies your turn of mind is perhaps what affects you most. What would one not give, what well-being of body or soul, for some new reassurance as to its old capacity to see things straight?

Even to-day nothing would suit me better than to fall back on the same explanation. But it seems to me impossible, an impossibility which, truly speaking, seems more general than particular. I mean by that, that it would throw light, at need,

on Lucienne's behaviour in her exploration of carnal things. But it was in what follows that she became more strange even. Far from facilitating my knowledge of it by a sort of mounting path, all I had done was to prolong the level ground to the foot of a sudden fault, precipitous.

Of course, I did not at that moment realize it. Yet I felt that it was one of those theories which, remote from the facts, satisfactorily explains them, and spares you the trouble of seeking further ; but which, brought face to face with them, cannot stand its ground.

Lucienne's character gave so little the impression of pre-meditation, everything in her radiating such spontaneity and harmony of spirit, that it was difficult to believe she was cheating herself. Had she been playing a part, she would have needed quite an extraordinary mastery of herself to be able, at the most abandoned moments, or faced with sudden temptations of voluptuousness, never to forget her part. But more than all, I think there would have been something queer, disintegrated, in the way it would have expressed itself.

I should not have seen that limpid attentive glance (which her ardour suffused, exalted : but could not muddy). She would not have gone on talking of the flesh with so loyal a devotion. Nor would she have been able, the instant after, to talk of something else with the same spontaneity. For Lucienne, who was a *grande amoureuse*, was in no wise "sex-mad." Once the sort of recklessness of the first days was over, everything was of interest to her as before. She made the most of our journey, and welcomed its incidents and beauties with everything in her. She seemed able to give, no matter what it was, its due. But carnal love took first place. And doubtless it was because there was no question of disputing it with her that everything went so well.

Once only, I amused myself putting her to the test. That morning we had arrived at Saintes. Everything had been arranged with a view to our being able to count on passing the afternoon in our room. There was never any need to discuss that question to be in agreement on it. But I was not acting in good faith. I said to Lucienne :

"The town seems to be cut up into two or three parts. The

objects of interest are somewhat scattered. We can't see everything in a single walk. And you know we have to start off early again to-morrow. What do you think about it?"

She looked at me, blushing slightly, and seeming to think. She ran through the pages of the guide I offered her. Then with a tender sadness:

"When we are parted . . ." (never since our marriage had she made any allusion to the separations my occupation was soon to impose on us, neither had she ever seemed really sad) "we ought to ask ourselves what we should most regret."

It was honest, lovingly pure, and deeply true.

But if Lucienne was in no wise sex mad, neither were we both obsessed by it. I might have thought so, given the place physical love occupied in our acts, our thoughts. But the word obsession rang false. And whenever I wanted to convince myself of the fact, I had but to call up again my unique but characteristic experience of sexual obsession.

So little was our passion an unhealthy one, that I am not even sure whether it would be true to call it passion. Indeed, we resembled rather those beings who discover at one and the same moment both a stabilizing faith for their souls and a new vital balance. At the base of this new equilibrium there was what Lucienne called "the fusion of the flesh," one of the two mysteries of the religion of sex. This *liaison* established between one flesh and another, only manifested itself completely during our embraces. But in reality, it filled the whole background of our daily existence; and remained subjacent to all our activities and the changing currents of our words and thoughts. If it gathered up as often as it could the privileged moments of possession, it did not stop there. I sensed in our amorous ardours, more even than the desire for another such fulgurating fusion, the aspiration to some uninterrupted embrace. It seemed to me that in our place, beings of another structure might possibly have brought it about; and I wished to believe at least, that to complete the conception of love upon this earth, animals existed able to remain conjoined by coupling through a whole season. For ourselves, some difference possibly in the conventions of public decency, a society whose members paid no attention to the behaviour of lovers, might

perhaps have sufficed to enable our bodies to make us further reduce, or attenuate the interruptions imposed on us by circumstance. In the train which conveyed us through the western provinces, I picture us, no longer respectably seated facing each other, a young conventional couple, but close against each other, exchanging slight caresses, hardly conscious, the slight excitement and voluptuousness resulting from them being but a means whereby our bodies might constantly react upon each other, sensing and experiencing each other, a diffuse and, so to speak, virtual phase of the union of our bodies; or even locked together, our flesh in contact, each aware of the other in the form of a sustained pleasure, yet for all that not ceasing to look at the diversity of the plain outside, to speak, or compare past impressions, or be more responsive perhaps than ever to the world outside, its sights, or still more open to welcome such subjects for meditation or conversation as it offered; and in short, succeeding in making of the fusion of the flesh, a profound calm condition of existence, integrated and essential to us both, in the way that our circulating blood does not preclude the discussion of a problem and, if it circulates more rapidly, augments the agility and keenness of our spirit.

As for knowing whether one's nervous resources would be adequate, that is another question. Even though we cannot be certain they will not end by re-arranging themselves otherwise and regulating their expenditure, it is possibly as dangerous on the deepest levels to give oneself up to thought uninterruptedly, as to endure for days together the minimum of stimulation or even of amorous pleasure. Who knows whether women are not sometimes very near that point? But so far as Lucienne was concerned, I avoided calling forth any confidence which might have disturbed her as to herself, or revealed a too obvious proportion of sensuality in her ardour. But it would not surprise me to learn that on certain days not a moment was free from that amorous throbbing, and that to the abiding thought of "the fusion of the flesh," which maintained her spirit under its spell, her very flesh replied with a no less continuous sensation of voluptuousness, as well supported by her nerves as the pleasure of breathing mountain air.

Such imaginings, looked at coldly, have an air of madness.

or at least of morbid exasperation. But when they are borne upon the very current of reality they appear much more normal, and a strong effort would be needed to make them seem disturbing. In any case, to me they do not seem negligible. And for him who seeks to comprehend, their value is as a pathway leading onward.

Until quite recently I had worked on this book without revealing it to a soul. Yet certainly, and more than once even, I was tempted to confide in the other principal witness of those events, and even to consult her upon the difficulties which hindered my progress. But my desire to have recourse only to myself was strongest. A comparing of reminiscences, besides the possible difficulty of requesting such a thing, seemed to me to have more against than for it, diminishing in the author of such a work, the concentration of his spirit, since we are too easily inclined to believe that the whole truth has been laid bare, merely because another is in agreement with us: but finally and chiefly, because each would intimidate the other. At the distance which we had moved from those impassioned weeks, I should not have been daring enough to open for discussion memories so living. Or rather, they would not even have been evoked. There would have been too many inhibitions to my remembering.

But some days earlier, as we were talking of something quite different, Lucienne betrayed that she knew, as having tried, the difficulty of retracing in writing the very events which have meant most to me.

I questioned her. She ended by confessing that she possessed a fairly voluminous note-book in which our meeting, engagement, marriage and subsequent relations were related with 'many blanks however, and a great lack of proportion,' which seemed to me equivalent to saying that she had given more space to such periods as interested her, while neglecting others.

Naturally I was anxious to become acquainted with that book, though I did not hide from myself that it was a bad way of going about things. Should I be able to stop reading it in time? For if I continued beyond the point my own book had reached, how could I avoid being influenced by it subsequently?

Lucienne, quite unsuspecting, came to my aid. Immediately she sensed my curiosity, she hastened to warn me that a large part of her notes were shapeless and unreadable, and that only the beginning had been set out clearly.

I begged her to let me see, at least, that beginning. Finally after much hesitation and almost with regret she consented.

I have just read it. It deals with Lucienne's life during the last months which preceded our meeting, and with the earliest period of our love, leading up to the dinner with the Barbelenets.¹ I was absorbingly interested in reading it and it left all sorts of impressions on me. I have talked about it, and even argued about it lengthily with Lucienne.

In the first place I very sincerely complimented her on her work, which honestly is much superior to this modest report, both for composition and style.

"The very best novelist could find no fault with it."

Coming from me, such praise sounded to her like criticism.

"Is that a way of saying I have distorted or imagined things? If so, it was certainly not intended."

"No. Everything I could check seemed exact enough. Always excepting one point, however." (I wanted to tease her a little.)

"Which then?"

"When you describe the way of getting to the Barbelenet house you get the numbering of the tracks wrong."

"Oh, if that's all? I suppose you know them by heart?"

"No, but I know the system. The arrangement you describe is not in order."

"A lot I care. Is that really all you can find against it?"

After which we came to more serious questions. The greatest surprise I had, possibly, in reading her manuscript, was to see how different was the colour events took on for each of us. Materially both our testimonies agreed. The circumstances were indeed the same. But whereas with me they remained flat, ordinary, worthy at most of the fleeting mention given them, with Lucienne they take on a depth, a richness, even a mysteriousness which at first disconcerted me. That difference can be explained by

¹ That manuscript is the story of "Lucienne," the first part of this book. (Publisher's note.)

our different turns of mind, and above all by our pasts. When I first met Lucienne I was no longer ingenuous enough for such an adventure to seem in any way remarkable. I meant to enjoy it as fully as I could, but I was not bringing to it that immense vertiginous attention, that inspired trance of which souls of a certain quality are capable when they discover love. (But had I ever brought it to any situation?) It was natural therefore for Lucienne to perceive all sorts of new perspectives, strange and affecting details, where I but found a quickening of what I already knew.

Such an explanation may be adequate, but it only half contents me. When I had re-read, for the second or third time, certain pages in her book, it became impossible to go on seeing it as the simple phantasmagoria of love in the brain of a young woman. In spite of myself, I was intrigued and disturbed. I say to myself that these first stages of a bourgeois idyll must already have held latent something altogether different from the little I had felt there : that it was compact of preparations, prefigurations, presages of coming events ; that clearly there was no particular merit in Lucienne having been more sensitive than myself, since it had all taken place almost entirely within herself, in the secrecy of her deepest being ; but that nevertheless, some vague emotion of it must have communicated itself to me, of which the pages written by myself bear no trace.

Which puts me, not to mention the slight shock to my self-esteem, in an intellectual difficulty composed chiefly of certain indecisions such as these :

When two beings differ to such an extent in the interpretation of experiences undergone by them both, what part is to be attributed, in this difference, to their entirely personal reactions (therefore outside truth, a solution to which would be the seeking of a middle way) and what part to the special and unique clairvoyance one or other may have had at certain moments? (In which case we must summon up the courage to choose.)

If personally, during that first period I lacked clairvoyance, what tells me I had, or will have more of it in the future, and should I not do better to have recourse hereafter to the testimony of Lucienne?

Yet I persist in thinking that this work can have no meaning,

no application, no experimental value for me, unless I continue it by my own means, free from outside influence. (And have I not already impaired that value by reading Lucienne's first book?)

It was not possible to go frankly into these questions with her, for then I should have had to confess the existence of my own book. Instead I tried indirectly to draw out her comments and opinions though I meant not to be influenced by them.

There was an even more delicate matter to clear up between us. When Lucienne had lent me her book I had just finished the chapter that precedes this, in which I had measured the full extent of the kingdom of the flesh. It was not easy for me to forget it.

For all sorts of obvious reasons, I was not expecting to find in what I was allowed to read, striking revelations on the same subject. Yet I had hoped that with some perspicacity I should discover more than one indication to help me to comprehend Lucienne's sudden blossoming into an *amoureuse*, a most unusual *grande amoureuse*. Such indications have appeared to me to be almost entirely lacking. And what is most strange is not their absence, but what I should call their suppression.

For I find the following on a page containing certain meditations of the young Lucienne¹. "As to love . . . I know it all beforehand. Love experienced could only be the questioning verification of that love which I have felt within myself." And a little earlier: "Instinct spoke within me in the most assured tones." And further on: "The only thing I imagine with too little intensity is the physical possession of the woman by the man, and the tumult of the soul evoked by this unparalleled happening." Or again: "One must at least live through that, once, far from here, with some unknown man, and unrecognizable myself. . . . When? Where? On a journey, my face veiled. . . ."

Such phrases do not sound like fugitive impressions, noted as and when they occurred. They bear witness to a world of meditations, reveries, and are part of it.

I try to lead Lucienne to explain herself about them. First of all I get her to state that her account was written, at least in

¹ Page 140 of Lucienne's book.

its final form, well after our marriage, therefore when she was in possession of her marital experience. In writing it therefore, she was aware of the full importance that some day the kingdom of the flesh would assume in her eyes. How came it then, that although not ignoring the fact that it held a place in her girlish meditations, she found it not sufficiently significant to be worth mentioning?

Lucienne appeared much troubled by this question, which I put less brutally to her than it is set down here. I guess that her extreme honesty of spirit is at war with sentiments which I can hardly gauge. She seems to grope before finding her reply.

"I was a woman and married when I finished writing that, it's true. But I took care not to project the present on to the past. I had to avoid attributing to the Lucienne of then an attitude to things and their relative importance that she had not possessed."

"But your account often alludes to events and future experiences, and I think I know which ones. You are careful to pick out among your impressions before marriage, those which appear to presage or lead up to such experiences, those which in advance cast a certain light upon that zone of the future, and that one only."

"What do you expect? It is difficult to write without bias in some directions. Certainly for me, who have not a scientific mind."

"Yes, but you do not attach equal importance to them all. I am not in the least astonished by the hierarchy you eventually establish, as it seems to me, between your various experiences. But aren't you rejecting some?"

She looked at me most frankly before replying.

"Absolutely none."

"Well then?"

She thought for a long time. A slight tremor passes over her features. I feel she is going to make a profound descent into herself, possible only, like immense electric sparks, by accumulating immense power.

But practically everything takes place in the infra-regions of the spectrum. The few words offered to me are but the revealing lines.

"When you met me I was in a state of great psychological tension."

Or rather :

"I could feel my soul as distinctly as the pulse can be felt beating when you climb a stiff slope."

"I was not in a rational state, no, drunk with spirituality ; in a state of high tension because of it. You must remember the young women who go into convents."

Or rather :

"Yet you know that there is a spirituality which disguises nothing, which is not a deceptive form of anything."

Or finally :

"But principally, has the spirit not been present always? That is its personal adventure."

And referring to her book :

"It is the Lucienne there who became your wife afterwards. No one else. Another would have been unlike the Lucienne then. Haven't you thought of that?"

During the progress of our mutual avowals and discussion, I ended by scrapping all my scruples as to "method." I confessed the existence of my work. Lucienne did not seem particularly surprised. The tone of my remarks must already have put her on the track. I added that I was not anxious to show her just then what I had written, and that the first portion—that which corresponded to her book—was in any case of little interest ; while the second part was still unfinished and much preoccupied me.

"What are you calling the second?"

"The body's rapture."

Lucienne dropped the subject. I felt relieved, for I had just realized how frightfully embarrassed I should have been had she read, deprived of their continuation, the chapters just completed ; and, having read them, had she seemed unhappy or hurt, I should have been disgusted with my work and might perhaps not have found the courage to proceed further.

But now I have to forget all that exchange of conversation, and even Lucienne's book, to try and proceed, if possible, at my natural gait.

VII

FAIRLY soon after leaving Saintes we found ourselves in Bordeaux. It had been our intention to spend some days there, less for the city itself than for reasons of a practical order (slight purchases, underclothes to launder, etc. . . .) I hoped also to avail myself of the opportunity to look up a very good friend who worked in one of the shipping bureaux in Pauillac.

We therefore took return tickets to Pauillac. My friend was however absent for the day, Lucienne, noticing my slight disappointment, said, "Why not come back to-morrow? I shall take it easy. There are a number of odds and ends to be seen to. I shall go through all our things, I expect they need it."

The distance from Bordeaux to Pauillac takes but little time. We should therefore be separated for four or five hours at the most. I said I would go. It was the first occasion since our marriage that we were leaving each other for more than a few moments. For that matter I truly never felt any need to be alone. Had I felt Lucienne was letting me go unwillingly, I could most easily have renounced seeing my chum, or I could have arranged to meet him in Bordeaux.

In the tramcar that took me to the station I could not help but be aware of certain sensations in myself, so unequivocal as to be quite physical. "I am alone. Now I am alone. How strange to be alone." Neither the noise of the tramcar, nor the lights, nor the people's voices seemed what they should have been.

As I was getting into a compartment in which three other passengers were already sitting, I say to myself, "Where are you now, my little Lucienne? Dear little Lucienne." I looked at the corner which remained unoccupied. It seemed extraordinary and touching that Lucienne was not to occupy it,

or sit in it with a smile for me and an inviting nod, as she squeezed closer into the corner, to the place at her side.

I had some newspapers in my pocket, but I did not want to begin reading them immediately. I saved them up as a safeguard against possible boredom. I looked out of the window. The country was not altogether new to me now, for we had made the same journey on the preceding day. But a good deal still remained to be noticed. I tried to concentrate on what I saw. But there was a sort of mutual inertia between my spirit and the view. They were like two substances placed in contact in view of a desired reaction. But no reaction took place. Yet again I uttered the word "Lucienne," but not as when one simply thinks of another. I did not merely put a name to the image of a person. I cried out to her, and in my cry there was already the beginnings of belief in the potency of that cry. "Lucienne." As I said that name again I looked out at the countryside. I had a feeling as if a sudden gleam of fleeting light had lit it up, a heart-beat in which everything had come to life. A factory, new painted in yellow ochre, a villa standing on a little hill, a vineyard, all seemed suddenly, extraordinarily significant.

When that feeling faded it was as though my heart contracted. It could no longer satisfy me merely to observe how everything became indifferent to me again. The fact distressed me.

I took out my newspapers. Luckily I fell upon an article that was both exact and interesting. As the thoughts in the article began to involve me and hedge me round, and as I penetrated more deeply into them with some conscious effort at hiding, as in a leafy glade, I came nearer to the feeling of my ancient solitudes, but without altogether recapturing it. It would not come near. At best all I could think was: "That is what that state of mind was once, before you lost it." As to the ideas expressed in the article, between them and myself there was a feeling that the relation was merely conditional. "I should be deeply interested, if——"

Upon which I began to meditate. I tried to seem astonished, even anxious. I pictured my case as impersonally as I could. I called up my critical faculties, my irony, "So you have come

to this less than three weeks after your marriage " How humiliating. And dangerous. Indulge your conjugal joys all you wish. Sink into marriage up to your neck if that is what you like. But on condition only that you remain capable of instantaneously resuming your individuality and of recapturing at will your solitude intact. Why, even as a form of gymnastics it would be excellent. But now marriage has got you like rheumatism : ankylosed you, rendered you incapable of solitude. I shook myself. " You are not a simpleton. You have seen life. You have had other women. You were wild about other women, and it taught you all the better how to be alone. Does this compartment remind you of nothing ? Coming back at night from the Barbelenets ! You are no more alone at this moment, nor differently. You have got to find that same state of mind again, that same well-being of solitude. But why not, if you have not got old ? "

It was not difficult to conjure up any state of feeling I liked, but I could not feel them. I ended by telling myself, emphasizing my words, " It is terrifying but it's the truth. I am no longer able to do without my wife." With the words " my wife," and as if released by them, a sort of wave flooded my loins and abdomen, and made my flesh billow in its wake like a dove's breast when it moans, and struck into my heart as joy, as courage, and into my spirit as certitude ; a certitude which absolved me from all doubt.

This profound impulse through all my being was not simply desire for my wife. Nor the evocation of the flesh for a different flesh and its joys. Rather it was the assurance, as from my very entrails, that our separation did not count, that my body refused to be hurt by it, knowing full well that in a few hours it would come again to that other body, would unite with it, and that at that very moment the same assured prevision was no doubt making an altogether similar wave pour through Lucienne as, leaning over our suit cases, she laboured at her housewifely duties.

Suddenly, I was no longer anxious nor humiliated. To be thus linked to Lucienne was just what made my new happiness. I was grateful to my flesh and its amorous yearning for reminding me of it. My solitude was much less intolerable, since

the feeling lacked any real grounds in reality. The pleasure in looking at my travelling companions came back to me. And if I continued to cast an inattentive eye out of the window, it was because that was all the landscape deserved. I went back to my article with interest. But all the time a painful thought was striving to come to consciousness: "In some weeks it will no longer be a question of an afternoon's separation. What then?" But I held it off. An old repugnance to letting the future bother me, helped me to hold it off. A natural repugnance which my familiarity with the law of probabilities has fortified and legitimized. Even the probability of death for a living creature is not absolute.

At Pauillac I spent an hour and a half with my friend. I told him of my marriage and when it had taken place. He smiled. I sought, in a few words, to make him realize that I was very much in love with my wife, and that my marriage had produced great changes in me. While I was speaking, it seemed to me as if Lucienne's face was very near my own, that her breath was upon me, and that rapidly I touched her eyes and lips with my own.

I regretted not having brought her, since having come alone, I was manifesting where she was concerned an independence that was deceptive. I was certainly not going to explain to this friend how great my idolatry for my wife had grown. But had she been present, my adoration would have become visible, and I should have had a certain exquisite pleasure in giving him proof of it. I told myself also that Lucienne's smile, her laughter, voice, nobility were missing from our conversation then and there, and that it was a baser moment of existence, since she should have been with us to set a crown upon it. I pictured how great my friend's surprise would have been before her beauty, the shades of admiring respect that would have crept into his politeness. And suddenly the freedom with which I treated her seemed extraordinary to me. "Is it possible that I treat her as an equal, that I reply to her simply and without formalities, and at times almost as I would to my friend here?"

My friend offered to take me back to Bordeaux on a motor-launch which was at his service. The journey was much more

interesting than by train. For Lucienne it would have had the attraction of a novelty it did not possess for me. The tiny boat gliding upon the river would have shown her the ships, the docks, the interior life of a port, much better than any of our earlier walks could have done. Besides, her mingling in this kind of shipping intimacy would have made her seem to be in direct communication with an important aspect of my life.

So much so that her absence became a burning regret. I hardly dared look at the view. I should have reproached myself for any pleasure it might have caused me. In reference to which my friend said, "You should have brought your wife. It would have interested her." There was no malice in his words, but for a stranger to express astonishment at Lucienne's absence was quite enough to exasperate my regret.

This short separation left its traces. It shook up, both in myself and Lucienne, feelings which subsequently were to remain as though in solution in our love.

That love did not assume, so to speak, a less carnal character. But even in our most abandoned moments, emotions of tenderness would creep in, which until that time had found but little place in our ardour. The union of our bodies no longer found satisfaction in being merely the accomplishment of a ritual of mutual adoration. It became also revenge against absence, a struggle against separation, a kind of tragic affirmation. The caresses which preceded our embrace did not now address themselves only to that obscure divinity the lover divines in another's flesh ; but they sought also to comfort the heart that had in absence closed upon itself, and to be utterly comforting, and to protect the intertwined couple from even the shadow of a threat. Between two embraces Lucienne would gaze at my brow, my eyes, and kiss them meditatively, anxiously. As for myself, at the very moment of entering into her, I was deeply moved by seeing the shadow of some melancholy reverie sometimes linger in her features and on her admirable lids and lips. Only the immense abiding joy that awaited me deep in her flesh could dissipate and volatilize that feeling.

Another consequence of my excursion was to make me lend

more attention to the manner in which things happened when we were together, because they would no longer be part of my normal life, nor doubtless hers when we were separated. What my wife's absence would mean I had felt only too well. Not that my desire was inspired by mere curiosity, for it was with almost voluptuous fervour that I began to track out all the interacting forces which knitted me to Lucienne. There was as much pleasure in feeling myself the victim of them as in having my body clasped within her naked arms. And they seemed as amorously distinct one from the other as a kiss from her lips and the touch of her hands. To-day I see better how much underlying truth entered into these pleasures.

Thus, when we were in a restaurant, I would find myself remembering my meals *en pension* at the hotel in F——-les-Eaux. What a difference ! And how inadequate it would have been to say that it was my wife's society that now kept me from being bored.

At table facing Lucienne, the meal like some important act charged with responsibilities and delights, had all my solicitude. Scrupulously I interrogated the menu. I watched for the arrival of the courses, and helped Lucienne myself. I was all watchfulness to find out how her appetite went, and then her tastes. It was pleasant to me to watch this pretty living creature whom I adored go through the necessary movements of a being nourishing itself. Yes, I had transfused so much of my love into Lucienne's body that even substances which came in contact with it or passed through it, deeply, profoundly, interested me too. But also I watched over her as over a child one wants to grow up and have rosy cheeks and eager breath. And for myself, I took a much greater interest in the quality of food than in F——-les-Eaux, where though not altogether indifferent in the matter, I was most often resigned. (Thinking, it's pretty poor, but it is not of the first importance for it to be otherwise.) Lucienne, for her part, only ate with pleasure when she saw me pleased with the menu and the preparation of the dishes. In short, our meals became, in their degree, one of those common acts almost mutual between man and wife, of which those of the bed are only the most precious and most ardent.

For the rest, walking, or in the train, I was conscious of certain definite currents of my thoughts. Never had I known my spirit so admirably adjusted to feel well-being. I did not have that acceleration of ideas which ends by becoming so fatiguing in solitude. I did not have that feeling either of being obliged, as with a friend one sees from time to time, to force the conversation.

Again, a discreet and really most salutary subservience of thought to something other than itself had somehow come to pass. It did not any more function by virtue of its own impulse merely, or for the simple pleasure of functioning. Chiefly now it served to maintain between Lucienne and myself spiritual contacts as intimate and exciting in their way as any of our relations of the flesh could be; and we made use of it, where it was appropriate, to further our union. The thoughts we encouraged, or allowed a place in our conversations, were those which contributed either some different way of being in harmony, or else an agreeable difference of opinion which we were sure of being able satisfactorily to resolve. My thoughts went out towards my wife to meet her. And when the conversation was in progress, I would shift my thoughts so that they might accompany hers, trying less to elaborate my own than to enter into hers and glide in among them, following their outlines, and tracking them to their hidden sources. It was a matter of deep solicitude to me that any question I put Lucienne should affect her pleasurably, and that even an objection should seem like a caress. One consequence was that I too experienced a number of strange but most reassuring feelings, for in all my thoughts my spirit was constantly referred back to another's which it never outran or sought for in the void.

Somewhat in the same manner, we utilized the universe about us. In one sense, Lucienne's presence made me see it better, more eagerly, with greater sharpness. When a monument, an old square, a market-place, or the countryside we saw through the compartment window seemed perfect, my delight was altogether keener than if I had been alone. For the reason mainly that it was something our duality could thrive on. A church, more beautiful, or more unusual than we

expected, turned suddenly into a light in Lucienne's eyes, or the inflection with which some comment escaped her, or a forgetfulness of her sight-seeing tiredness, or a courage to proceed farther, in fact a reflection of the pleasure and gratitude she bestowed upon me. As did even a kiss she dabbed upon my cheek, apologizing for her shamelessness with a laugh.

There were moments when we had no need for outside sights, or any special reflections. To all appearances we were thinking of nothing. The thought that we were together was enough of itself to occupy us. Its pleasure for me was in the repose it lent the spirit, comparable with that of the limbs in sleep. Nevertheless it was not inertia, nor yet a degree of slumber. We continued to be in harmony with each other. But our exchange required no pretexts, and supported no weight other than its own. It reduced itself to a simple matter of exchange. Which did not prevent it being, in a sense, exalted too. In the train, for instance, having talked together somewhat and examined the people round us and their mannerisms, and the view outside, we would sometimes find ourselves facing each other in silence. Whereupon Lucienne's face, turned in my direction, would by degrees begin to smile. Then she would smile openly. Then, a tiny laugh, clear and full-throated would burst out, one single note, for which she punished herself by biting her lips. Nothing had happened. She was not laughing at anyone. She had not sensed some funny thought in me. But her eyes were saying "Pierre forgive your Lucienne. It's nothing at all. It intoxicates me to have you there."

VIII

WE set up house in Marseilles without any particular complications. I had deputed a friend who knew my tastes and resources to find a small apartment that would suit us. He had managed very well. At that period there was no housing crisis. The flat he found us was of medium size, on the fourth floor of a not particularly old house, with a view which, though not magnificent, was stimulating ; one of those views in which angles of houses and roofs encroach on the horizon of the Old Harbour, yet do not allow you to grow satiated with it too quickly.

The buying of furniture was the excuse for all sorts of promenades through Marseilles, which I knew well, and through which I had the pleasure of guiding Lucienne. We were each beginning to think a great deal of our approaching separation, though we mentioned it as little as possible. I am sure that that haunting fear helped to make every moment deeply interesting. Hours that might otherwise have seemed dull became most precious and irreplaceable to us.

To that too, I think, we owed the absence of the slightest difference between us. I am fairly quick-tempered by nature, and Lucienne's character was by no means vacillating. She knew clearly what she thought and what she wanted, even in small things. The details of our furnishing, the trifling but at times fatiguing decisions to be made, might very easily have created slight annoyances, followed by resentment. But we were miraculously protected by the thought that at any price the memory of each other must be kept free from blemish. Since circumstances themselves had determined two months as the period in which our conjugal life was to establish itself, we had to make a masterpiece of it, so that later we might be able, whatever happened, to look back to it as to our veritable "golden age."

Some three weeks before I had to report for duty, the vessel

I was to embark in came into dock at Marseilles between two trips. I seized the opportunity to show Lucienne over. I had no preconceived idea what would be likely to interest her in it, or what portion of the ship she would be most anxious to examine closely, or how long we should spend in it. All I had promised myself was that I would not do the honours too meticulously.

The ship in general proved greatly to interest her ; it happened to be a first-class mail-boat of 16,000 tons, of recent construction, destined for both immigrant and passenger *de luxe* service. Its ordinary route was from Marseilles to New York, whence after two days in harbour, it returned to Marseilles, calling at the Azores. Here it remained three days more and then set out for Marseilles and the Eastern Mediterranean, touching Asia Minor and then Egypt, whence it would return to Marseilles in certain cases via Algiers, in others, via Naples. In fact, this line was both a long-distance passenger line, as well as a provider of pleasure cruises. As a result, there was nothing very hard and fast about our lives. Of course, the schedule of crossings was arranged months in advance, so that the shipping agencies could advertise and guarantee dates of sailings. But the seasons and financial considerations led the company periodically to modify our itinerary and ports of call. Life on board was not so monotonous therefore as it is in the great transatlantic liners on the northern route.

Lucienne listened with extreme attention to the information I gave her on these matters. Her earnest desire was clearly to understand the duration of our separations, the variations in the dates, and the length of time we should be in port at Marseilles between two voyages.

In the ship, however, she made less effort to get a clear idea of the different places to which my duties called me—I might have to go into almost every part of it—than of the daily rhythm of my life, the usual paths in which my activities would lie. She seemed, in advance, to be plotting out my tracks in space, to be taking hold of my future hours. "This corridor, this staircase you may be using at any moment. . . . Between nine and a quarter past you must surely go through this door. You will touch that knob." (She touched the knob of a hand-rail fixed in an iron door.)

"Yes, above all when the ship is pitching. And don't forget the change in time."

Without any apparent trace of jealousy, she nevertheless asked me whether much of my time would have to be spent in the saloons ; and whether I really had, apart from my duties, to enter into the social life of the ship ; and whether, in particular, the women passengers made friends easily with the officers.

But it was chiefly my quarters that she could not tire of examining ; their place in the economy of the ship, their internal arrangements.

"So you really have two cabins all to yourself, one to live in, one as an office. And there's your bed. This table you will use to write at. The window does not seem particularly well placed for light. Show me how it shuts. And is there no possibility of water coming in when it is stormy ? "

Thinking of storms her eyes clouded. She was conjuring up all sorts of dangers. "And won't you be altogether too uncomfortable when it is stormy ? Is there really no risk ? "

"Risk of shipwreck ? That really does not count at all. If I were in business, in Paris, and had to travel some of the day in a car, I should undoubtedly run more risk. All that menaces us are a few discomforts. I am not a bad sailor, but still, a high sea does bother me somewhat. Yet don't forget that this is rather a privileged line. The part of the Atlantic we cross is much calmer than the northern route. As for our Mediterranean tours, a ship this size runs no risk whatever. Real tempests are rare, except in the Gulf of Lyons, and only with the worst of luck and at long intervals do you strike them."

Lucienne sat down at my table and herself opened and shut the porthole, and tried the lights, and the taps of the washhand basin. I understood her solicitude only too well, as also her need to participate beforehand, with all the precision possible, in every detail of my life on board. She made an effort to remain cheerful. But a hardly perceptible tremor disturbed her features. I think a mere word from me would have released her tears.

"How small your bed is. Is it comfortable to sleep in, at least?"

She sat down on it, and lay back, as though in play. I tried to remain very gay myself.

I gave her a kiss and caressed her hair. For the first time, possibly, I wantoned with her breasts, her body. Never before had our caresses had such an atmosphere of teasing and un-respect. But I was afraid of our emotion, and I thought this was the way to exorcise it.

Lucienne smiled indulgently. Then she rose, became serious again, and once more looked at my bunk.

"When your ship comes back, when it is the eve of your departure, I shall come here and spend the night with you. It isn't prohibited, is it?"

"Never fear. I shall ask permission from nobody. But you will be most uncomfortable, my poor dear."

"I want to be your wife here too."

As we were returning to town, walking round by the old harbour walls, she said: "I could be very comfortable on the ship with you."

"It's magnificent, isn't it?"

"Yes. But even if it was less so. Why aren't the wives of officers allowed to accompany their husbands?"

"It would be too complicated. Besides, after a time, very few, I imagine, would make use of the permission. However, as far as I know, regulations do not forbid them to make the voyage as passengers."

"Is that so? Then why shouldn't I?"

"My dear child, one such trip would cost us three months' salary."

"I could travel third."

"Dear heart! Why not in the hold with the emigrants? And me puffing Havanas in the first-class smoking-room!"

"What would I care, if I were sure of seeing you now and then during the day? Even once a day? You could manage to come to the foot of the iron staircase where I should be waiting for you?"

"No woman could be more adorable than you, my Lucienne; it is really tragic life should be so ill-adapted to hearts like yours."

"You really think it would be impossible?"

"Even if it were materially possible, the directors would not be long in finding it much too romantic for the satisfactory functioning of the personnel. And the captain? Yes, I see the captain's face the day he discovers I have my little wife lodged away in some corner of his boat."

"Then there really is no way? But heavens, it's frightful."

She was not smiling now. The expression on her face was that of someone caught in a trap.

"Are you certain there is no way? But suppose I cannot part with you? Why go to all the trouble of improving machines and wireless, if there were not one need more imperious than every other, that of not being separated from someone you love."

She added: "I shall get on the boat without anyone knowing. I shall hide myself."

And it was impossible to tell whether she said it like a child continuing its game, or whether she was not going suddenly to melt in tears. I answered: "That's it," as though it were a joke and patted her hands.

I looked at her face. A sort of despair was now imprinted on it. But there was nothing puerile in that despair. Lucienne's eyes, her features, breathed forth their usual intelligence and perspicuity. . . . Her thoughts at this moment could not be treated more lightly than any other of her thoughts. Faced by such thoughts it was impossible to assume an attitude of superiority, or to think "She'll get over it," and turn to something else.

And indeed, I was, on the contrary, overwhelmed by an altogether new feeling in regard to my situation. "There is no occupation that is perfect. And I have always admitted that mine had its disadvantages—serious inconveniences in fact. Perils, if you like. Why not confess that the risk, however slight, of going down a hundred miles off the American coast in water four degrees above freezing point is unpleasant to think about?" But it had never occurred to me as being tragic in this particular fashion. "Yes, a tragic occupation. I shall be forced almost totally to abandon my wife. Our meetings will always be on the eve of departures. We shall embrace like

travellers on a railway platform. Yet at this moment, what is there in the universe so important to me as my wife? Nothing can replace that for me. The boot black here is better off than I am. Because if, for him as for me, what is most important in the universe is his wife—a wife it may be, unkempt, with sunken breasts—he knows he will return to her to-night, and every succeeding night, and whenever he awakes. And even there, by his box, it is likely that nothing prevents his wife from coming to see him. . . . And this waiter here, he too is happier than I——”

In this manner my thoughts became almost overwhelming. The suffering they caused was so much more because I dared not utter them to Lucienne. Doubtless she only fought against her own distress because she credited me with the strength to resist it. I almost betrayed myself by saying aloud: “What children we are!”

But it was said without conviction or assurance of any kind. I was in no kind of state to see even the slightest childishness in our ordeal. Cowardice? Possibly! But then, what is meant by cowardice? What proves we ought to have this kind of courage? For the altar of what god is such a sacrifice demanded?

Our despair, taking shape, spread round me with the swiftness of a squall at sea. One single idea kept a clear field, an issue: namely, that no power superior to my own kept me imprisoned in my job; that, if need be, I was free to change my occupation; and that I could always, whenever I decided that lack of money or even indigence were less inhuman than separation, make my choice.

I almost said as much to Lucienne. I refrained. For she was quite capable of accepting my thought, not as a consoling reverie to put one's doubts at rest, but as a practical proposition to be gone into then and there. I saw how she would reply. “Why not now, Pierre?” in a tone which would in advance reduce all my objections to nothing, as well as all my so-seeming reasonable considerations. I could not even have frightened her by depicting our material difficulties. She had experienced and overcome others. She would add: “Three weeks only are left in which to fashion our life.” In the state

was then in, such sincerity, such a manner of looking things straight in the face and postulating the problem of our life together, by substituting for all the conventional symbols their human values, would have found me without any serious objection. I should have been unable to defend my attitude except with half-hearted reasons, and a heart ready to betray me. I might perhaps myself have ended up by saying : " Why not ? " And yet I knew I ought not to give way to the ease with which our common distress caught us by the throat.

In this manner we walked along by the Old Harbour. A few small pleasure boats bobbed at anchor. Two or three more women's names. In my thoughts I wrote " Lucienne " on the flank of the towering ship that was to take me into itself. I meditated on that dark genius in man which makes no serious effort to diminish the sum of human misery.

I had suggested we should eat out, but as a distraction it did not appeal to her. We therefore dined at home in the little almost unfurnished dining-room, where daylight lingered still.

I had helped Lucienne to lay the table and prepare the shell-fish we had bought. We avoided talking of anything outside our trifling occupations of the moment. In spite of all her troubled thoughts Lucienne's charm was unaffected. At moments, interrupting her work, I took her by the hands. Very gently I made them relinquish what they held, and when they were empty and free I covered them with kisses. The smell of the sea left on them by the shell-fish, the traces of sea water in no wise sullied them. On the contrary they thus recaptured almost the odour of amorous hands. I cannot tell whether Lucienne noticed it too. But she realized that in the midst of my kisses the smell of her hands intrigued me, and I saw her smile.

Then I clasped her in my arms. And again my whole body responded to the rich inexhaustible presence of her own. Yet again I gauged the potency to comfort, the sudden exultation, the overwhelming intoxication that welled out from her breasts and belly, merely by their soft pressure against me ; and my hands caressed the gorgeous resilient wedges of her

back and waist, and my lips fastened themselves to a mysterious point I had picked out in her curving neck. My natural impulse would have been to break off these delightful joys of the meal to lead Lucienne to the bed. It seemed to me as if only the deep interactions of the act of possession could shake off the evil influence which the visit to the ship had cast over us, and only the extreme limits of sensual delight blind us to the true relation of the present to the future. And that in that way we could believe, with some slight good will, that the intensity and perfection of the moment had by some magical operation succeeded in modifying the rhythm of time and the inevitability of events.

But it was not illusion exactly that I needed. On the contrary, I would have preferred my spirit to have remained at its most truthful, and even for nothing disquieting to invalidate the evidence of my emotions. If, after taking Lucienne in my arms, my embrace protracted itself, it was not in order to convince myself that the flesh of my young wife continued to be constantly and infinitely desirable (had I ever doubted it?). Nor was it even to exasperate my desire. Since my marriage, I had forgotten what the seeking for amorous stimulation could be, just because of the perpetual desire I had for my wife, and for the sharpening of every faculty that instantaneously took place the moment Lucienne's body was promised it. But, in thus embracing my wife, and protracting, no longer merely voluptuously, but with anxious attention, the delicious crushing of her body against mine, I felt I might possibly be about to feel myself possessed by some unsuspected notion of the union and separation of beings ; a notion till then ignored by my unthinking joy, yet to some degree capable of calming me, and rendering me some hope. While thus I continued to press calm kisses on the same place on her neck, desire was neglected while I awaited the new conception that was to come to me.

Finally Lucienne disengaged herself from my arms. Before leaving her altogether free, I held her by the hands. I looked at her, not at all that body I had just embraced, but at her face, her eyes. They seemed not only very dear, but new, full of question and the beginnings of answers I had not yet discerned ; pitiful also with a reproach.

It came to me that I had never looked at them enough. During our engagement I had let myself be kept at a distance by their very charm. It had been my pleasure to leave them aside as a recourse against the future of our love. In our first weeks of marriage, altogether given up to Lucienne's body and the kingdom of the flesh, I had hardly ever appealed directly to her face, her eyes, other than that my gratitude might mount to them, or that I might receive from them with a surprise which was always exquisite, the consent they bestowed upon our most fanatical acts. Even following on our short separation at Bordeaux, I had not known how to find for them the attentive adoration and questioning fervour I had lavished on her body.

As if she had more or less guessed what I was thinking, Lucienne said : " You do not look at me often enough like that."

She added after a moment : " You must often look at me like that, these days."

In the ensuing week, the anguish of separation found expression in me as a question that became an obsession.

" Come what may, we shall have had two privileged months." But they were already so owing to the circumstances. " Shall I have made the most of them ? Have we used them to the best advantage, those two months which never can return ? "

I felt it important to have Lucienne's reassurance.

One day at table I said something like this : " The future is not as I should like it, not as uniformly encouraging as you deserve, as our love, it seems to me, deserves. But nothing can take these two months from us. Do they not seem to you, everything considered, to have been extraordinarily successful."

She meditated, then : " Nothing has come short of my expectation."

" And yet you expected a great deal, I know. But I feel you are keeping something back. What ? Say it, even if it's unpleasant ! "

" I am thinking . . . what was there I could have done to be more your wife, unite myself more closely to you ? And I feel so helpless in face of our coming separation."

Her voice had changed. A profound distress had abruptly disclosed itself. Lucienne, my wife Lucienne was holding herself back from crying at the thought of the absence that would come between us, enormously widen, and put an abyss in place of the tiny width of the table.

I could not think how to comfort her. Take her in my arms ? Cover her with kisses ? Possess her yet once more ? I might possibly succeed in diverting her thoughts, but not in making her find some miraculous charm against my absence in the fusion of our bodies.

The memory of our brief separation in Bordeaux passed through my spirit. It was as though some vague comfort, the confused idea of some recourse was mingled with the impression it had left on me. I felt a desire to talk. I began to describe to Lucienne my spiritual condition on that day ; the depressing effects of solitude and then that eagerness of the flesh which had seemed suddenly almost to triumph over our separation. " It may possibly have been only one more illusion. But suddenly distance no longer mattered, nor the time I had to pass before I saw you again. It was indeed the fusion of the flesh that came to my aid. So firmly was it anchored within, that it manifested itself despite our separation. Just think, I felt this impulse, as if after passing through me it then passed into you. You follow ? It was not at all desire embittered by regret or absence. It seemed to give me almost the kind of assurance and tranquillity that comes with possession. As if, where the undulation of my own flesh ended, just there the warmth of you began."

Lucienne listened very attentively, weighing my words, seeking to separate out such verbal excitement or over emphasis as my words might contain.

" Are you not exaggerating somewhat what you felt, Pierre ? Did you really feel me there, me, my body ? That would be too good to be true. Or are you simply trying to say that with a little imagination you would have been able almost to deceive yourself, and dream for a moment I was present ? Or perhaps, quite simply, that your longing made you take patience, since it brought me close to you, and was a reminder of our embraces of the coming night ? "

I hesitated to reply.

She leant over towards me, the more to give it point, too engrossed in her thoughts to be ashamed of the mere words she said : " Did you really feel you were inside me, Pierre ? You can't mean that ? Don't try and make me believe it, since it is not true."

She added, after meditating for some time. " And if that separation had lasted a fortnight. If you had had to wait another fortnight ! Could that have comforted you ? "

IX

I SAID once, talking generally about myself, that I am not given to long fits of depression. My temperament resorts very speedily to mechanisms of defence. I would not wish it therefore to be thought that the days preceding my embarkation were passed in a state of continued anguish and melancholy.

From the first, my approaching resumption of duty, and the various rearrangements consequent thereon proved a distraction. We also began to look out for a servant. So far we had made do with a charwoman, given the modesty of our interior, the ease with which we could eat out, and above all, our desire to be together undisturbed. But Lucienne was going to be alone. The permanent proximity of another human being would help her to withstand the more material forms of boredom. There was no question of digging out of one or other of our families some sour old relative who in no time would have got to treating Lucienne as a hussy, poisoning our interior with her mephitic emanations and driving out of our home, first the youth and then the love. On the contrary, a servant would suit admirably, provided we did not get just anybody. We were not asking her to have a school-leaving certificate or boarding-school education. But since she was to provide company, it was most important that she should have the sort of personality which renders bearable—or even pleasant and stimulating—the presence of another, including the trifling remarks, the comings and goings, and the silences within those walls which at present contained us. A temperament difficult to define in few words when applying at an employment bureau. Even though at this period servants were by no means scarce, our search prolonged itself somewhat. It did not displease me to protract it, since Lucienne was thus preoccupied with something besides my departure. Also it provided, in those last days.

various topics of conversation in which the comic side was uppermost, and altogether it gave our new life not so much the air of a misfortune to be accepted, as of a state of things to stabilize.

These distractions did not prevent me having the thought of our separation always at the back of my mind. But that hidden thought was no more inert than the others. It spurred me on to make certain provision against my time of solitude, as one prepares for a siege, or a winter.

The nearer I got to the moment for parting from Lucienne, the more I feared leaving her before having got to know her. In these two months of marriage, had I not been guilty of neglect, or abstraction, or lack of attention? But her flesh, the differences in her flesh, the diversity every part of her body could assume for each of my senses, that was an aspect of the beloved object I was sure of possessing. To get it all back when we should be separated, all I should have to do would be to relinquish my own flesh and blood, my senses, to their own dreams. However exquisite the detail that came to consciousness in some caress, I knew it was inscribed somewhere in my nerves.

I had also begun to try to ascertain, ever since that day at Pauillac, what Lucienne's presence, in reality, signified to me, and also the mingling of our presences. The flow of our thoughts, moving side by side in conversation, the slight anxiety, and all the delight I drew therefrom, I should find again and with ease. For that was still a form of love, of sensuality almost. Even Lucienne's person in the ordinary current of existence, her ways outside love, her appearance and gestures, all the reactions that did not concern me any more than they concerned our duality either, which were the essential of the living Lucienne, I had but the vaguest notion of. Suddenly separated from her, I should only be able to imagine them with all sorts of hiatuses and as though affected by a kind of vague distraction.

"Hurry, hurry," I told myself. "You will be alone soon."

It is true I put no obstacle in the way. What I sought in effect, was to make static certain impressions which had often struck me. Now that I was giving my attention to it, a

moment was enough to trace the line of each of Lucienne's gestures on my spirit, and bite it in and make it as indelible as a piece of tattooing ; as for instance her manner of sticking her hat on a peg when she came in, her movement of lifting up her hair, the lengthening of her fingers spread out a little, her lip wrinkling, and the slight contraction of her eyebrows ; her irises shifting suddenly upwards and to the left when trying to think of something, and a dozen other traits of the same order.

Then I questioned her voice to make it yield its secrets to my keeping. Frequently already, I had wondered whether my pleasure in hearing her speak, which from the very beginning of our love had always been most keen, and also most unique, owed most to the timbre of that voice or to the things it said, or, in fine, to the spirit with which it spoke : a spirit in which was manifested an absence of affectation, a non-aggressive sincerity, a love of truth into which no instinct of propriety entered, an appeal to have its mental pleasure shared (which is as irresistible perhaps as an appeal for the sharing of physical delights), and a slight abiding element of surprise, no less agreeable when accompanying thought than cold is to water, the essential gaiety of the intellect.

By listening more carefully I became convinced that all this charm, whatever may have been its diverse origins, could almost be comprised in the three or four principal inflections of her voice, and that those inflections alone, without any help from the meaning of the words, would have sufficed to give an impression of the fundamental qualities I have mentioned. Also that this power was closely allied, so to speak, with the musical modulation of those qualities, but that it seemed much more natural to explain it, leaving music out of the question as if the spirit inevitably recognized in these twists and turns of voice, certain impulses, attitudes and intentions of the other hidden spirit.

When that had become a conviction, one felt suddenly drawn into a new order of interpretation that was rather overwhelming. I would look for instance at Lucienne's nostrils. I would think yet once again that they were of great beauty, as well as domineering ; that merely by vibrating slightly, their beauty would

become terribly active, invade you suddenly with the desire to obey, to please, to use all your ingenuity in the service of this woman, and that such prestige could quite well be reduced to geometric terms or elements of design, and be accounted for by certain relations of lines and purely formal harmonies, though, at that particular moment, my desire was to interpret it purely psychologically, and see in the fleshly design a delineation of interior potency.

An idea of this kind in me was bound by its nature to flourish exceedingly. And having tried itself out on one feature of the beloved face, it attacked others : the eyes, the mouth, the cheeks. " Surely the beauty of these delicious objects must be principally determined by their spiritual significance ? " By which I did not mean some vague notion of the expressive potency of the features, superadding itself to their forms and thus utilizing them for good or ill. My thought was : " Can it be that between a mouth as adorable as this one, and one that is ugly, the true difference (or rather the true source of the difference) is really an invisible one ? What I like, what subjugates me, in the drawing of this mouth, is it not the combination of feeling and thought which determines and animates its slightest twists ? I have but to imagine this lip a trifle more coarse, this line a fraction shorter or more curved, those lips a degree less mobile, and I should be forced to attribute other thoughts, other internal impulses, other aptitudes and reactions to the invisible spirit. In fact, it is not so much the features I see as the signs I read. The signs are composed of a most subtle and elaborate integument of flesh. I say this integument is beautiful because the thoughts it expresses are beautiful—nobler, richer, and finer than those of others—and that I know it."

I was like a man who, having spent much time on pure geometry, discovers algebra passionately. Little by little he accustoms himself to set his equations like springs, or elastic armatures, beneath the curves his eyes reveal to him. He cannot do nothing to stop himself. He abstracts their autonomy from forms in space, and is always in search of that equation which sustains and profoundly determines them. He finds it enough to scrutinize some shape awhile, to have, more or less

confusedly, the apprehension of its formula. No elaboration, no distortion nor degree of complication, no circumvolution, will put him off thinking that that too is as interesting and provocative as a masked equation. In this man's eyes the spirit of algebra is all-devouring.

In such manner my notion dragged me in its wake, far beyond the bounds of common sense. It forced me to admit that Lucienne's beauty did not stop at her face, but was continued with no differentiation through all her body. One after another, I conjured up the different parts of that body, and I meditated on the feelings that the sight of them had inspired in me, feelings which were by turns, amazement, admiration, overflowing joy, the desire to sacrifice myself, diverse degrees of enthusiasm. "What is there to prove to me that all this too is not in a category different from physical things? Why should what is true of her mouth, her nostrils, not be true of the rest? If, to take an example, the sight of her breasts, her belly, inspires me with a fervour which seems to me at least as near (not to go further) religious ecstasy as to bestial rut, is it not because a host of thoughts issue from Lucienne's spirit and settle there, though she may not know it, moulding, swelling, filling out her flesh? And if it be true that their beauty is less personal and their expression less mobile than those of her eyes and mouth, is it not because the thoughts I am dealing with are informed with a certain permanence and universality?"

And the feeling to which Lucienne had confessed in the presence of male desire; that idolatrous veneration which made her soul as of some woman's of the past, could that be explained otherwise? The "terrible beauty" of which she had spoken, seemed pure derision if applied merely to its form. Nor could I see it either as a simple outburst of feminine lust. And to reduce it to a conception of purely functional beauty, the beauty one allows in a bridge, the hull of a ship, a pair of pincers, seemed to me too banal, unless it was a play on the word function, and so a reintroducing of the analogy I earlier adduced (like saying that the beauty of a curve is entirely the consequence of the algebraic function expressed by it). But one reasonable explanation I did see: namely, that it is natural

for a real, an ardent woman, to feel some shock at her first sight of male desire ; and that shock of emotion is accompanied, or is fed, as you wish, by numerous though confused ideas, such as potency, fecundity, sensuality, submission to nature, an ancient brutality, thrilled fear, prerogatives older than any law, etc. But these ideas are already in existence in the woman's soul. The carnal object which stimulates them could not merely by being contemplated communicate them, for there is nothing in its form which expresses these things. An idol carved in stone, with not even the least resemblance, even a magic symbol of the thing, could evoke such thoughts as effectively as the fleshly idol.

But gliding upon this stream of reverie, it seemed to me preferable to attribute this woman's feeling to a direct clairvoyance. Can it be denied, I said to myself, that when a man is at the mercy of his desire, everything spiritual in him is shunted into his sexual function and flows through it? The transfiguration of that flesh and its visible exaltation, depends less on physiological mechanisms, than on the nature and flow of thought. (The impotent know that well.) Why not admit that all through history, this nature and this flow of thought, with all they may contain, both individual and universal, both permanent and transitory, both sexual and simply human, betray themselves in some sort in the shaping of the flesh? Why above all, when desire exalts it, the baseness or nobility of desire, with every changing hue borrowed from generosity, cruelty, gross appetite, enthusiasm, should such shapes be undecipherable, when we flatter ourselves we can understand them so well in the changing aspects of the lips and eyes? And why should not the eyes of the desired woman be capable of reading them? It is true that often some modesty averts them. Or if they summon up the courage to brave that sight, they are side-tracked by feelings which spring from shame, even though they deny it, such as cynical curiosity, the delight in immodesty, the thrill of being shocked, which turns to laughter. But if a woman has the spirit of strength to overcome these restraints, and enough natural nobility to acknowledge the presence of her thoughts, whatever they may be, that woman has the right to speak of terrible beauty. For it is indeed the

countless legions of thought, drunk and proud, a tumult and a horde, an army made fanatical with thought, the terrible beauty of an army, that the man to whom the flesh of such a woman is about to open to, leads on to the assault.

And if in this matter too it had to be agreed that the individual is of less importance than the species, and that this "terrible beauty" is common enough, and that the woman, if she dared, might acknowledge it in many another flesh than that of the chosen man, it proves only that desire and love stir up and mobilize, far from the tiny provinces of "personal" ideas, certain great and ardent thoughts which lie in wait deep in our common humanity.

If I have gone so closely into these reveries, it is not because I exaggerate their value. From the moment I did so I became only half their dupe. I have a certain taste, natural and acquired, for theories, for the sort of protracted conversation they whisper in the ear, above all when one is alone. But on the other hand I am the least hallucinated of men. I retain the utmost capacity for seeing reality and spiritual aspects. For many people the handling of ideas is accompanied sooner or later by certain affections of the senses. If they have been so unfortunate as to formulate an hypothesis relating to something in the world outside, from that moment the object becomes deeply impregnated with their hypothesis. It is no longer the thing itself they sense. Whatever it may do to manifest itself or claim attention, they have put their own ideas to simmer in its place. I am little subject to that malady. The pleasure I take in any theory leaves me free to judge for myself in regard to it. Above all I am incapable of approving it, for reasons which seem valid to me, unless I can compel my feelings to agree.

Thus the ideas I have just mentioned did not affect my vision. When thereafter, I contemplated one of Lucienne's breasts, its delicate skin, the nipple; when I made it tremble under my hand, I tried hard to understand how the hidden spirit could work upon these fleshly forms, manifesting itself through them. But I did not invent explanations. In the

degree in which I lent them significances which I was not in a position to see in them, I knew already, I had a clear perception where my vision of the external world ended, and where faith began.

But what in all sincerity at this moment interests me in this internal travail, is that I perceive it as a defence mechanism expressed in a most unusual form. For some time Lucienne had made me feel that the fusion of the flesh, however intense and complete we might find it, left her more than ever helpless before the menace of our separation. She struck a blow at the prestige of the prime "mystery" of the religion of sex. I was brought up sharp against the very bounds of the might of physical love. And that same woman who had, in her body, instructed me in the mysteries of the flesh, as though by her reinvented, was the woman who now insinuated doubt.

But that religion of sex in which I had been immersed for two months was important to me, perhaps more so than I imagined. And I was conscious that I owed to it, not only a sublimation of my lust, but a true satisfaction of my intellect, and a serenity that my contentment sustained. For the first time in years I was dealing with a universe which seemed fully consistent, yet full of mysteries and warmth. If that religion were allowed to evaporate, I might perhaps never again reach the degree of vitality in which it maintained me. And so my spirit had had to embark on a sly excursion into apologetics. As others, when faith wavers, seek proofs of the existence of the Deity, even in the work of the scientists who deny him, I suspect it of having sought new justifications for an idolatry of sex in the very regions from which the menace seemed to come.

In fine, I had recognized the need to spiritualize our love, or if you prefer, to carry into my approaching solitude the viaticum of a love in which the spirit would have more part. From which came my effort to come close to the person of Lucienne through her gestures and behaviour, and steal from her voice, her eyes and features, as much as possible of the spirit of my beloved. I had realized that in my cabin on board, in mid-ocean, certain perspectives of love would be changed for me. In the dreary light of separation Lucienne's moral self

would take on new values. The memory of a thought of hers, or the expression in one of her glances, would be of infinitely more help to me than any projection whatever of the flesh. When I should evoke her, to clasp her in imagination in my arms, which Lucienne would I seek to seize and know again : the naked amorous one flushed with ardour ; or the friend, the comrade, she who walked by my side through the long streets ? And more simply still, Lucienne, the creature who bore that name, never seen elsewhere, irreplaceable ? What would be most important then ; the memory of having possessed her ; or the assurance of faithfully owning some earnest, some inimitable signature, as though an imprint of our tiny being on common space (that harsh space identical in substance with separation and with death) ? Yes, to see again in all its precision the act of smoothing the hair, or flicking a dress to smooth out the folds (merely to think of that is to want to weep aloud).

When I thus began to think too much about our separation, I hurried to clasp Lucienne in my arms to prove that she was still there. Or, taking her by the hands, I gazed avidly at her from top to toe.

And then it would seem that I had never held her enough, embraced her enough, or prevented her from being elsewhere enough. And by a sort of irrefutable logic, the need to possess her physically took possession of me as the strongest possible protest against my dispossession ; as the supreme proof of actuality.

To such an extent that physical love was already finding in these impulses of the heart, the opportunity for a revenge that was in no wise premeditated. But also it sought a subtler justification, which more strongly impressed the spirit.

Between these crises, in which the anguish of separation caught me up and distracted me, there were hours of comparative calmness. Separation was but an idea still. Lucienne was always present, always my wife, close and adorable. Whatever the future perspectives of my love might be, the future light upon our separation, so long as Lucienne was present, and standing in the true radiance of her presence, could I not be conscious of all of her and of her body, or cease

continually to vibrate to it? In whose name should I have denied it? Despite myself, my intent gaze slid downwards. My thirst to adore and caress would slowly descend from her face towards a more carnal flesh, and seek to find yet once again the accustomed idols in the shadow of her dress, and by degrees mount in intensity, in expectation of that bed in which their nudity would triumph afresh.

And just when I might have reproached myself these flights back to the flesh as weaknesses, as relapses in some degree obsessive, the reveries I have described conspired to absolve me. My love found dispensation from mounting towards the spirit. For the spirit came to meet it, to flow into it, to fill all the flesh and all those carnal places from which I was unable to tear myself. It was Lucienne's thoughts, her mental attitudes, the plenitude of her being which I encountered where my eyes and lips alighted. Not one of my kisses risked going astray, or missing the spirit. Lavished on tender mounds, lingering in folds, they remained my points of contact with an interior loveliness, my ardour to find her yet again. It was thoughts also, I flattered myself, that I was offering in exchange for this feminine body, and conveying into it with such ardour. The union of the flesh, even if I continued not to guess whence it could draw the wherewithal, magically, to fill the abyss of our separation, yet made me feel that, by continuing to fling my thoughts and spirit into it, the natural virtues inherent in them had value, in so far at least as they could make less cruelly obvious the realization of how limited was its power.

X

IN reality, what was then taking place in my spirit was of secondary importance only, and to-day I can hardly see more in it than an intellectual pastime. To what acts and what changes did it tend ?

It must be admitted, leaving aside all *amour propre*, that in the main, as regards this adventure, I was passive. Even when we were married, and on the occasion of that famous "bridal night," what had mattered and been operative, was not at all such ideas as I might have evolved for myself in the preceding days, nor my expectations, nor my particular manner of envisaging such events as marriage and bridal nights, but Lucienne's ideas, her feelings and ways of seeing, and more still, her interior energy, the influences communicated to another spirit by the mental concepts she had evolved of it.

Similarly, at this moment of writing the only truly interesting question is to know what Lucienne was most deeply thinking. Was there nothing in her spirit beyond what appeared in her speech ? Apart from her anguish at my departure, was she not hiding a feeling of vague expectancy, an expectation of certain resources to be furnished by her instinct on the day when our separation, instead of being a menace, became an actual fact, to be lived through, to be gauged, to be struggled with ? Or had she begun some interior labour already, the first gropings in the search for a way out ? Before even risking such gropings, was she putting preliminary questions to herself (like wondering about direction, or finding a road from a map, or the reflections of a prisoner who, before he begins the attempt, ruminates in theoretical terms the problems of escape) ?

If I were willing to turn this account into an ordered story, I should attribute to myself at that moment a clairvoyance which in effect I did not possess. And if I were a novelist dictating the behaviour of his characters, I should show how Lucienne's

spirit was given over to a more or less conscious preparatory effort.

I can confess quite simply that even then I had perceived nothing, suspected nothing. (All the better if that removes the last ounce of prestige I have in my own eyes.) But it may be I am exaggerating a little, in the opposite sense. Let us say then, that at that moment I had given no considered or clear thought to the possibility of any change of attitude in Lucienne.

Yet, when I try now to recapture, without introducing anything I learnt later, the effect Lucienne made upon me during those last Marseilles' days, it seems clear that in some way the tone had changed. Somehow a disconcerting element had crept in. It is likely I was conscious of some modification in the attitude of my wife. But our approaching separation sufficed so well to explain it that I did not trouble to seek further.

It is thus that I once more see myself, as night is falling, returning from some errand I have made alone. Lucienne was standing near the window, with the stillness, the expression of someone entirely absorbed in something she is looking at. But her position was such that she could have seen only a neighbouring wall, which could not have offered any prospect nor presented any strange effect of light.

I recall too that I had completed the last part of my walk and my climbing the stairs, full of amorous thoughts. I had meant to draw Lucienne into the bedroom. Then, night having fallen, we should have gone out to dine in a restaurant.

These thoughts disappeared immediately, without however leaving any effect of depression. Lucienne's attitude did not cool my ardour. I did not feel either sobered or disappointed. I found myself suddenly transferred to a different state of mind which interested and engrossed me enough to quench my desire, but which nevertheless implied no ideas in special.

Then Lucienne smiled at me, her glance lingering on me. Even to-day, with the retrospective clairvoyance I can now have, it is difficult for me to say in what this glance differed from other glances. What mental phrases can I put behind it to light it up a little, render it transparent and decipherable?

"You have disturbed my reverie, but since that reverie was

about you, it makes me glad to find it is you in person," or rather : " Where was I ? And you, where are you ? Where have you got ? Which of us is farthest on ? " And ten other equivalents, equally hazardous, which I would not go into, since I should end by putting into them, not what I felt at that moment, but what I have discovered since.

Besides, I do not believe I at all asked myself just then to what hidden thoughts her glance might correspond. I had no need to interpret it. I felt its effect. What effect, exactly ? There again, it is not easy to stop being vague without anticipating a great deal. I would risk something like the following, putting an interpretation on the word " site " which might seem obscure to others, but is very evocative to me. " An effect as of the commencement of a general transformation of the ' site '."

This impression was accompanied by a very special state of astonishment, intermediate between well-being, anxiety and hope. A condition which could more easily have found physical than mental shape. I mean that I seemed on the point of a nervous shudder which would have involved the upper part of my body, and especially my head ; I felt a sort of short nervous flame flash into being, run up my cheeks and crown my skull with fleeting waves. And at the same time a feeling of exaltation, of unquestioning trust, possibly even of illimitable help. But nothing inspired me to read clear thought in it.

There you have practically all I can indicate. The least effort at greater exactness would cast me into the realms of pure imagination.

The difficulty I have just encountered gives me some idea of those which now await me. It is in the period I now enter that Lucienne's rôle was most mysterious and decisive. I question whether I shall be able to see it dispassionately if I continue my work in the conditions under which I have so far laboured.

There is no great help to be drawn from the various conversations which Lucienne and myself were able subsequently to hold in regard to these incidents in our life. Always they were fugitive, fragmentary, full of reticences. We returned from this

adventure with very mixed feelings, in which a certain shade of despair even had its place. We did not indeed desire to forget it. But a strange sort of modesty, a fear of confessing ourselves undeceived possibly, made us avoid thinking of it together.

Thus, the only documents which can be of help to me are Lucienne's notes. I must get her to lend me them and find a means of utilizing them, without being influenced by them, and without the effort of my own spirit being in any way diminished or falsified by them.

I therefore broach the matter to Lucienne. She thought at first I wanted to take cognizance of that portion of her notes which dealt with the beginning of our marriage and the discovery of the kingdom of the flesh. She was in flight immediately.

When she realized I was referring to the subsequent period, she confessed that her notes in regard to it were numerous enough, but less elaborately worked upon than the text I had already read.

I begged her to lend them to me, explaining at the same time the use to which I intended to put them.

"You know the task I too have undertaken, mistakenly or otherwise, but it is one I am anxious to complete. I have reached a point at which the uttermost clarity has become necessary. I am not writing to amuse myself. I write to be sure of certain things, in so far as is possible. I have no more courage to go on groping as I am now doing with a light that comes from one side only and that the least important one."

"I thought you held very strongly to your independence of memory and judgment?"

"I will try and keep it. I won't go right through your notebooks. When in my own book I come up against something that I cannot understand, or which seems doubtful, then and then only shall I refer to your notes. I shall consult only the passage I need."

"But how will you set about finding it?"

"I will ask you to insert here and there, at the top of the page, or on a book mark between the leaves, the dates of the events you mention. If for instance I am in doubt about events between the 20th and 25th of October, I shall drop a sounding-line just at that point. After which, I shall shut up the book."

"You can really undertake not to dip further?"

"Of course! Once when I did Latin verse I dug out from somewhere the crib used by the professor. I had it at my side. But I only referred to it when there was absolutely no help for it, when I had made every possible effort by myself. My will is strong enough at need."

Lucienne hesitated. Then: "Where have you got to in your book?"

"To the end of the first month in Marseilles."

"Right to the very end?"

"Yes, almost."

"Has the vessel sailed?"

"It is sailing next day."

She meditated. Her eyes were smiling. "When it has sailed, I shall lend you my book."

"Why not now?"

"I want you to have left the kingdom of the flesh."

"I have left it, it seems to me. Only three or four pages more to be written and the ship weighs anchor——"

"Well! You must show it to me. Yes, when you have got to that point you will show me the lines, 'When the ship had weighed anchor' written on the page."

"Must it be that very phrase? To me it seems on the solemn side, besides not being very exact. My boat will be moored to the quay. And I have as little desire to call it a ship as to address you in the third person."

"It doesn't matter, since the phrase is just something for me to go by."

I had feared the day and moment of our first separation as something extremely painful. But the circumstances themselves were responsible in a sense for partly anæsthetizing me.

As she had promised herself, Lucienne had come to pass the preceding night in my cabin. She had come in time to dine on board. After the meal I had to attend to various duties. Lucienne in the meantime had locked herself in my cabin.

A little after eleven, having finished all my work, and sure no one would disturb me till morning, I went to find her. I

knocked at the door of the cabin that served as my office. I had for my use a little suite of two cabins as I have said ; an office and a living-room, with a communicating door over which was a curtain.

I heard the bolt shot back. I went in. At first I saw nothing. Lucienne, having opened the door, had quickly taken refuge in the second room.

I pushed aside the curtain. I saw Lucienne standing altogether naked, with her back to the mirror of my little wardrobe (the glass reflecting her form increased the splendour and stimulus of the spectacle).

Thus begun, our night attained the extremest limits of amorous ardour. It was in some sort a second bridal night, differing from the first in the total absence of all fear, all reserve, between us. Lucienne instead of her former hesitation at the portals of the kingdom of the flesh, now moved about within it freely.

I felt that what she principally wished was to people the tiny space in which I was about to live, with her nakedness, her amorous gestures, the images of our caresses and embracings, and as it were stigmatize the furniture. She knew already that the mirror of the wardrobe would remain for me indelibly marked with the reflection of her form. She desired one of our embraces to take place on the divan which took up all one side of my office. She made me sit in my arm-chair before the table, in the place where I would work and kneeling at my feet spread out her hair about me. Finally, in spite of my objections as to its discomfort, and my offers to let her rest alone, she insisted on finishing the night with me in my bunk, in the closest possible embrace. In this way we passed some hours of an extraordinary mingling of half sleep and amorous movements. As it was very hot, we had thrown off sheets and blankets. The light was out. We were each of us covered now by the body of the other, now by dark warm air. Our nerves were keyed to such a pitch that the slightest involuntary movement became exquisitely pleasurable. And when we happened to remain immobile a little too long, the body of one of us, without altogether coming out of sleep, or referring to the spirit, was able to simulate one of these involuntary changes

our eyes. Those of Lucienne seemed to be saying : " If our aid lies there, have I not done everything to ensure it ? And yet——"

But the bustle of my occupations prevented me from thinking much about that glance. In six months' leave I had got a little rusty. Several times I had a feeling that the hour for sailing would surprise me before I had got everything settled. A little more, and I should have been out of temper.

So much so that I became less conscious of the passing moments of separation. I felt as if I were living them provisionally, putting off till later the effort of truly living them. Besides the occasion hardly lent itself to signs of sorrow. We were not going to give my colleagues on the boat something to look at, nor add our effusions to those of the passengers and their families.

We put a good face on it, even when the gang-plank was lifted away. It seemed to me that below, on the quayside, Lucienne was continuing to smile. Possibly there may have been a tear in her eye. But already she was too far from me for the light in her eyes to be modified by her tears.

When the ship had weighed anchor——

I put down my pen. Three days passed and I wrote nothing——

Then I called Lucienne. I showed her the interrupted line.

She gazed at it a long time, as if she were discovering in the words she had herself dictated, some illimitable meaning, something strange——

" Well ? Isn't that right ? "

" Why yes ! "

She looked at me without seeing me. She bent again over the page and began slowly to say the three first words, in the voice with which some passer-by reads a mysterious inscription on an ancient wall :

" When the ship——"

III

LOVE'S QUESTING

I

"WHEN the ship had weighed anchor," and the engines could be felt throbbing, I found I had suddenly come to a stop in one of the passageways on D deck through which I happened to be passing. There was no apparent reason for that stop. It took me by surprise and was not far from alarming me. I dislike registering inexplicable gestures in myself. I do nothing to encourage them, and they leave a certain anxiety behind, like a shooting pain or the heart missing a beat.

I drew out a cigar and lit it, pretending my halt was due merely to the desire to smoke, and shrugging it off I went in the direction of my office.

Several people were waiting for me. Two or three subordinates ; a few passengers diversely perfumed ; a gentleman. The ladies were passing the time in looking round at my abode.

What most interested them was what they saw least of, my second cabin or bedroom, visible through the opening between.

Before seating myself I let the curtain fall over that aperture. It seemed to embarrass them. But I put on my most charming air, and having got rid of the stewards, turned my attention to them.

These people were all waiting for me to get different cabins allotted them. Every voyage begins thus. A purser who knows his job does not mind devoting all the time necessary to clearing up such complaints and providing an illusory satisfaction. The first complainants were speedily replaced by others whom I delighted by granting as special favours the cabins which their predecessors had begged me to change.

I then set myself to working out the positions at table, a much more delicate operation. The dining-saloon on a liner is revealed in a glance to every eye. It is no easy thing, therefore, to make every passenger believe the place allotted him

happens to be the best one. The passenger lists have to be carefully checked and the most important figures tracked down. Why, some Lithuanian celebrity might escape you ! Besides, no one carries in his head the names of all the political bosses in Colorado. And there is no need to think *a priori* that an American Latin will be flattered at being sat between a Portuguese and a Roumanian. If you put him among Yankees he may feel out of his element and silently bemoan your want of tact. But there is just a chance he may suppose you have specially put him there as the best qualified representative of the Southern Continent to sit on a miniature pan-American congress.

For two or three hours I was plunged in such-like diplomacies, with gratitude for the forgetfulness it brought with it. Then my energy went. I called my second and asked him to finish the job for me. And under pretext of familiarizing myself with the working of the boat, I went off to take a look round.

As it was of quite recent construction and I was shipping in it for the first time, my main interest should have been in such innovations as it had to show. But for the moment that was not what attracted me. I was, on the contrary, trying to get back into certain of my oldest seafaring habits. In six months' leave, I had, so to speak, forgotten nothing. But even the most indifferent things now affected me. And it was with a sort of emotional concentration that I noticed the fact. I hardly knew whether my reactions were more those of a stranger astonished by new places, or a wanderer's at long last returning to his own land. Behind each thought that came to me lay hidden the dubious question : " Am I no longer the same ? What can have caused such a change ? "

I walked down a corridor, and I was listening to the noises of the ship. My body sensed them first. They cast a spell of doubt and dreaminess over me, subordinated me to their particular atmosphere which seemed as though compounded of ritual sounds, fragments of a service, murmurings, the sighs of organs, scraping of praying stools on stone flags, heard

casually during a visit to a church. I said to myself : " What is there so extraordinary in all this ? If it does affect me, is that because I have long been familiar with it, or on the contrary, because here and now the sounds have become strange ? "

At moments, a sort of slight trepidation ran through the ship. Quickly it grew in violence, then for some seconds a sort of stutter or hiccup would make the metal partitions between which I was walking shudder throughout their length. Then suddenly all would grow calm.

Or else, a sort of internal rumbling would begin to run along the various hidden pipes. Then these borborygms would come to a stop, close at hand, or in the distance, and burst one after the other, precipitately. They conjured up a vision of inexhaustible profusion. Upon which I became aware of a tiny, frail, monotonous whistling. It was impossible to tell where it came from. It issued from the whole structure, in the way that some delicate perfume may at times belong to a huge object. It seemed somehow interminable. Nevertheless I ceased to hear it. Had it really stopped ? I went on trying to find it, and then perceived that the pipes too had fallen silent. The last borborygm had disappeared briskly, like the last of a file of rats into a hole.

As I went past the cabins I heard the joints of the wood partitions creaking under their varnish, the locks of the cupboard doors clicking at intervals, close and precise like the clashing of two incisors.

Equally, I found again the smells, and chiefly the general smell peculiar to the interior of ships. But though it may have contributed to my emotion, it did not disconcert me or suggest any questions. Rather indeed would it have set aside any that might have suggested themselves to me. Enveloped in the ship's smells, I was in direct contact with such similar and numerous days of my life, that it evoked less something in the past than the feeling of my own permanence. I greeted the smell of the ship as naturally as a man who has been running smells his own odour wafted from his clothes.

Uniting the lateral corridors of D deck, I found a fairly extensive area given over, as in the decks above, to lavatories and bathrooms. The noises, smells, the quiverings, all the

manifestations of the ship, even its structural creakings and oscillation along both axes, seemed to have chosen this glittering junction as the place in which to meet.

When I went in, the place was empty. I remained a few moments to wash my hands and question my face in the mirrors, mesmerized somewhat by the shimmering tiles, but above all to feel the ship shower itself all over me like a fine rain.

Dinner-time found me still swayed by these influences. I entered the dining-room in a state of some absorption. I had no particular impatience to see magnified to natural size the human mosaic whose composition had cost me so much effort. I took my place.

A little later I became aware that someone was smiling and motioning to me from a neighbouring table. What was my surprise to see sitting at the table corresponding to my own, and called the "doctor's," an old colleague named Bompard.

We must have missed each other as we came and went in the afternoon. I had not bothered to find out whom we were shipping as medical officer. Even when filling in my plan of the tables, it had been round an abstract doctor that I had arranged the more important passengers.

It was past ten before we could join each other, since we had each, first of all, certain civilities to perform, such as taking coffee in the smoke-room with one group of passengers, or a liqueur brandy at the bar with others.

I calculated that it was three years since we had seen each other. Before that time we had spent eighteen months in a boat where I was assistant purser. A very close friendship had sprung up between us. When the time came to separate, it seemed as if we were really solid friends. But subsequently neither of us had so much as lifted a little finger to re-establish the slightest contact.

I had found myself in identical situations more than once. "On every boat," I thought, "where I have lived some time, I have made at least one friend. Yet all the choice there was, was between half a dozen colleagues thrown together by chance. From one point of view it is by no means flattering.

I should have thought myself more difficult to please. But it proves also that there is more in the average man than we think. The most unimportant tie holds latent, as if in the form of an imperceptible bud, a complete friendship. Separately tended, forced a little, the plant would demand only to flower. The degree of our necessity is the deciding factor. That man passing, who at first sight seems so ordinary, would be turned into a friend by me if we had to trek through the bush alone together. And what is strangest is that he would be worthy of it. O, the noble possibilities of the human species ! But what a trifle it depends on, and how precariously ! ”

Without attributing a more especial importance to my friendship with Bompard than it had actually possessed, I could not help, none the less, thinking with a sort of terror of the utter silence and inertia of the separation that had followed it.

And I felt thereupon that although I hardly named it, yet the thought of separation had taken on an altogether astounding significance for my spirit. It hollowed within it, as it were, a central cavity from which there flowed in all directions an anguish rich with associations, a poignant glow.

No longer was it an idea like other ideas. It had become one of the vast categories of a mental universe, abruptly made stable. Separation, absence. All their wide meaning, their mighty empire was revealed to me. The boat, under the elegance of its furnishings and the complications of its machinery, was something simple and terrible, an instrument of separation. Its speed unwound behind it, not so much the log, as absence. Its speed was the speed of sundering.

Me, personally, the boat had sundered from Lucienne. Throughout the whole ship, in the dining-room, the passages, the cabins, among the mirrors and reflections, Lucienne was missing. In my world of that moment, mine to see and verify, Lucienne existed only as someone absent. The ship's noises, which so lately had accompanied and enveloped me, seemed like a sort of incantation of absence. “ I only heard them because I was alone. The more I hear them, the more I shall be alone.”

And everything that made me feel in this manner the might of separation, struck me like a well-aimed blow. There was

no comfort in thinking how different passionate love was from ordinary friendship. That friendship, in its season, had been everything it could have been. When Bompard and I had been living side by side on our ship, nothing serious had ever menaced it. Apparently it would have endured as long as we were neighbours. It contained no element to prevent it lasting all our lives. But it could not prevail against distance, and in fact made no attempt so to prevail. Where men are concerned, and the living, everything is a matter of distance——

I was still saying this to myself while I watched Bompard coming round the turn of the promenade-deck towards me. And as his feet struck the boards, with a sound I cannot now remember, I saw the distance between us diminish, and the sole virtue of proximity effortlessly recreate that friendship which three years' silence had reduced to nothing.

II

"No end of leave, and to finish up the finest boat in the service: you haven't much to complain about. It seems you've got married also?"

"Yes, two months ago."

"Quite the newest of newly-weds, then?"

Bompard scrutinized me smilingly.

"Were you astonished?"

Before replying he looked into my eyes to find out how much freedom I should allow him to talk of the matter. "A little. Even though in such matters one ought to be prepared for everything."

"But suppose I myself am still astonished by it."

"No, really?"

We had come close to an open window which looked out over the forepart of the boat. A dense illimitable current of air swept through it. As we spoke, one side of each of our faces was against it.

"If I dared," said Bompard, "I would like to ask you a question."

"Do."

"When exactly does one realize one is going to marry?"

I began laughing.

"Does my question seem absurd?"

"Not absurd. Difficult."

"You see, it's like this. I am, as my landlady puts it, a bachelor, and it suits me very well. I don't feel at all that it is a transitory condition. And that makes me think: 'Did not those others who ended by marrying feel the same too?'"

"No, evidently not all of them. There are 'bachelors' who from very early on think of nothing but marriage: and others who, though they take every advantage of their bachelor's existence, yet realize it is transitory and get all the more out of it."

" Good. Yet you admit that nevertheless one can be a ' bachelor ' like me, feeling stable and fulfilled, but still capable some fine day of getting himself married ? "

" There are particular reasons which compel me to believe it. "

" Ah . . . But does one get any warning ? "

" How exactly ? "

" Does one see any signs of approaching danger in oneself ? A change of humour, ideas ? You see, I should hate to be nabbed by surprise. "

" It is difficult to reply generally ! I would almost go so far as to say that for people like us the rule is just that one should be taken by surprise. "

" Ho ! Ho ! You are not merely thinking of cases in which one gives way to pressure of circumstances, where one has been more or less out-manceuvred ? "

" I am not thinking of anything as obvious as that. But the following sequence seems to me natural enough ; one is a bachelor as one has always been, without anxiety, without forebodings. Suddenly, one decides to get married, not in the abstract naturally ; a certain minimum of circumstances is necessary, but nothing at all like external pressure, and still less like an ambush ; nothing internally that can be called a real moral crisis. Afterwards one begins to think over what has happened and things come to light, a whole order of things, which appear entirely to justify the event, and one ends by saying to oneself : ' But when I made my decision with such strange readiness, was I aware of all in advance and instinctively ? ' If you like, one begins by marrying, and only later does one begin to find reasons for it. "

Bompard caressed the vibrating quadrangle of night air between us with his hand.

" My dear old Febvre, you rather frighten me. You talk like someone who has been initiated. Yet I would like to find out. Perhaps you have heard that Dutrey has been converted ? Yes, last year. As we had been very close friends, I took the liberty of writing to him. I hoped he would send me a few pages written in the language we had spoken together, which would have helped me to get some idea what had happened to

him. The letter I got back might have come from some holy father."

"And do you think that is what I have come to, in my way?"

"No, all things considered, I hardly think so. . . . But, you see, this time too, my one chance of understanding is not to be told too much about the effects of grace, but to be brought back rather to the feeling I know, such as love, for example. What change has to take place in love, as I know it, for it to impel you suddenly to make such a decision? Is something added or taken away?"

"You think it's as simple as all that?"

"I can discern quite a number of different considerations: the desire to have a home, a regulated life, comfort, furniture, children, home-cooking, money, all sorts, in fact. But I don't see why men to whom such things are important, need take years to realize it. I cannot think they were ever tranquil, seemingly confirmed celibates like me, eh?"

"Nor like I was."

"Well then. . . . And then there is comradeship, friendship. A combination of love and friendship. But the woman I think I loved most was a very close friend also. I would talk to her about everything and not mince my words either, in fact as we are talking now. But it did not draw us into marriage. Far from it. I had the temerity to confess, even more cynically than I would have done with someone else, what I felt on the subject. Well, what about that? A combination of love and friendship. And in effect one does want to say that is what it is. But. . . . But in the first place that would not explain the suddenness of the resolution, which is what intrigues me most."

"Perhaps because of its unusual nature——"

"Possibly. But you yourself have experienced it. Good. Let us argue then about that particular case. Amity would on the other hand have introduced an element of reflection, and deliberation."

"Besides, experience proves, does it not, Bompard, that one must not count too much on friendship to give . . . urgency to a tie, or save it from . . . how shall I put it . . . vicissitudes?"

Bompard looked at me, smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes," he said, "in three years you and I have not sent each other two postcards even. That also merits inquiry. But that is something else. I am still hoping you will explain yourself."

"I am trying, I don't want to talk in riddles, or say the first thing that comes into my head. Is such a love more intense, more passionate? Clearly not, at least when it begins. You can, no doubt, bring up twenty cases in which the very excess of passion has made the idea of a marriage flat and ridiculous.

"A love which reaches out to the whole being from the very first, which is not released nor determined by physical beauty merely. Yes, it has been said often enough, and it is true. A love so compounded that permanence is deeply part of it; and therefore one does not welcome it, nor surrender oneself to it in however slight a degree, without subscribing, though it may be unconsciously, to the notion of its persistence. Yes, that statement is even more exact. There is also the lassitude of being alone, which accumulates for years without one's noticing it. Some fine day it suddenly breaks out. Then, if a woman turns up. . . . Yes, that's the principal thing. As for considerations of expediency, material advantages, note that I am convinced that they provide the simple explanation for a great many marriages, as they do for sudden conjugal vocations in seemingly confirmed celibates. Still, as you say, we are discussing a special case. You see, it seems to me that at times something occurs in practical life which is equivalent to what takes place in science when some postulate is admitted, to allow of a step forward being made, because it is felt that the sequel will justify it; really then, in view of the new order thus rendered possible. . . . in favour of an unrevealed world. To some extent it is the point of view which those who make bids for power pretend to adopt. Yes indeed, the least vague way I can find of putting it, to help you to get some idea of this adventure of mine, is to call it a postulate or bid for power. The most peaceable of bids for power, naturally, brought about by proclamations or posters."

"But your case only hangs together so long as it is a question actually of a new order, and so long as one accepts its newness."

"In the degree in which it is perceived, that must of course be admitted."

"So you say. Then I am reduced to taking you at your word."

"As one believes a witness."

"I beg your pardon. The question of probability arises. If you come back from China, after having been a snake-charmer or nationalist executioner for six months, and say to me: 'It is an altogether new situation, I assure you, and very difficult for you to conceive it adequately,' I should believe you. . . . But with the best will in the world I cannot perceive in marriage any but known elements, whether it be a question of sentimental, physical, affectionate, comradely or promiscuous love——"

"For marriage in general, that may be so. My adventure may however have had nothing at all in common with ordinary marriage, except the name and formalities."

"You seem determined to go on puzzling me."

"Indeed, no!"

"Well then, I am going to conjure up a simple straightforward picture. A young woman, pretty, charmingly dressed, pays a call with me. She precedes me through various doors and is addressed as madame. Good. She does the talking. I lend half an ear. She seems to me to be dealing rather well with the situation. I feel some slight paternal or proprietorial gratification. A young woman is sitting facing me. We discuss trifling events, even the joint in front of us. A young woman helps me to buy a set of brushes. It is fatiguing to wander round a large shop. We get irritable. Where brushes are concerned our respective educations have left us with different prejudices. We say cutting things to each other. A young woman is in my bed, neither more nor less clad, neither more nor less hugged than a mistress. Nothing prevents my going on wanting her, nor a certain desire for tranquil possession diminishing in any way the voluptuousness of the situation, nor even, can one ever tell—the memory of our adventure in the brush-shop, increasing it? A young woman cheers me up one day when I am worried, kisses me on the brow, offers me a cigar-case in tissue paper to console me. . . . You see, old fellow, what I am really after is the unknown."

"Do you look like getting it?"

"Well, where is it?"

"In the young woman. The one you mentioned."

"I see. But there's nothing very startling and revolutionary in that. Perhaps you mean that novelty does not lie in the ingredients but in the mixture. That what was so unusual was the way in which those different personages were combined in the same woman, and the light they shed on her. But from that to talking of a new world! My feeling is that the very first time one possesses a woman carnally, even the very first time one experiences sexual pleasure one discovers a new world."

"So I have always thought. In any case one thing does not invalidate the other."

"Unless the legal tie, the living together under the protection and sanction of the law, have given your feelings a new lease of life. But from that to a sort of absolute and permanent rejuvenation, hum?"

"My dear fellow! Think what you like. There is obviously some truth in what you say. And I should be loathe to assert that experience will undeceive you. But you make it seem as if I were trying to get you to guess something, the answer to which was on a scrap of paper hidden in my palm. That's stupid. While you're searching for an answer, I too am questioning myself. I assure you that ten minutes ago I had no idea I should be setting forth a theory of marriage to you. Or even confiding in you. And now I see that to justify more or less adequately what I have put forward, I should have to bring into account aspects I do not at all want to go into, even with a very old chum."

"Are they particularly intimate, those aspects?"

"And if I were to be drawn into doing so, they would be useless for what I want, because I know that without having time for reflection I should express them formlessly and without precision. You said, 'Living together'; and there you came very near essentials. At least, so it seemed to me. To you? Less, I should say. You also touched on many other quite important points . . . physical love . . . you follow, there is perhaps no single term that can serve me as it stands,

to make you feel what I believe to be new in an experience such as mine. Wait. Something has just come to my mind. I hesitate to say it because I have a feeling that it will seem meaningless to you, purely verbal."

"Well, say it, anyhow."

"Have you ever attached importance to the presence of another person?"

"What a question! Of course!"

"Yes, but how much importance?"

"A terrific amount, sometimes."

"What do you mean by that exactly?"

"That it made me profoundly happy for that someone to be present. That I should have been extremely unhappy to have had that person taken from me."

"Good. A woman?"

"Yes. And in a less degree, this or that friend."

"A much less degree, I should say."

"Well, why not? I am not homosexual. . . . But you judge me too severely. I think I stand separation pretty well."

"Yes. I daresay."

"But I enjoy very keenly the presence of friends, so my character must be pretty sound."

"In short, you mean that there are some people you like being with more or less. A feeling which may range from a degree of pleasure which you hardly notice—your neighbour at table with a pleasant face—to excitement, rapture; as with your present mistress, let us assume. You would not at all like it if someone came and led her away while you were being nice to her. You would rather be responsible yourself for any separation between you, than that she should. It may happen that you have to leave each other sooner than you like. You put off the kiss which marks the moment of parting. With friends it similarly happens that you sometimes put off the last handshake. Would you like to put it off . . . indefinitely? Even the kiss! Have you ever wished to put that off indefinitely?"

"Why, yes."

"Deep down in yourself? Leaving aside all suspicion of

tender play-acting, willing that presence—as though your will could decide the matter—to stay eternally at your side?”

“You want to know a great deal.”

“When a woman was close to you, have you ever said to yourself something of this kind? ‘She is here. How miraculous that is, in the sense that it is altogether beyond me, that to be really conscious of that fact, convinced of it, and get the most out of it, I should never have time or strength enough. It is something too real for any capacity in me of responding to reality. It is something brimming over, overwhelming, inexhaustible. A time cannot come when I shall cease responding to this presence, or concentrating on all the many forms by which that presence manifests itself, in order not to lose a particle of it.’ And from that there springs an attentiveness, a thirst, a concentration of ardour, and an attitude of the spirit as though it desired by every means in its power to become one immense scrutiny. The idea too that the rapture of that presence makes too great demands to be able to be borne for long, that it can only be endured in gusts, and that between two such gusts a sort of stupor or repose must be accepted, full of sudden fears that the presence has flown and the contact is for ever broken, and in which you tremblingly fear to find yourself alone and dispossessed again.”

Bompard looked at me with astonishment, reflectively, suppressing a smile.

“To such a point,” he said, “no . . . decidedly no.”

“You see, at first blush nothing could seem more accustomed and familiar than the phrase ‘To feel the presence of another’ . . . yet——”

“Just a moment,” he said, smiling again; “it may sound incongruous, but still I’ll take the risk. You mustn’t be offended! I haven’t the slightest intention of laughing at you, nor of making the conversation seem like a smoking-room. But this very moment, as I was listening to you, your words seemed automatically to change their places; a change in the worst possible taste, I admit. I was really doing my best to see things your way, but in spite of myself I could not help interpreting them in an altogether less ethereal sense; yes, it called to my mind certain moments of extreme excitation one

sometimes has in possessing a woman—I say sometimes, for there are times when possession takes place with a tranquillity, an economy of expenditure altogether middle-class, ha, ha!—in short, the kind of furious appetite, the ravening eagerness which it inspires you with when you happen to be just right for it. As soon as that came to my mind, do what I would, words seemed only to have become a pictorial, a poetical way of saying the same thing, even of saying it with a certain precision. Certain women I know would have been in ecstasies of delight over it. I know it will annoy you to hear this, but I assure you it is very difficult to push such thoughts aside. It is as stupid as a play on words, and as obsessive.”

His remark sent me off on a train of thought.

“You must think me a coarse fool,” he said.

“Of course not! I was just thinking I ought to have begun my explanation at that end——”

“Bosh?”

“Yes. I ought to have remembered that it is our bodies, or what we name such, which first discover that other presence and the capacity for exaltation enshrined in it. At least so I think. I cannot say for sure. Possibly, there are cases in which the reverse is the rule. We can only go by our own experiences. Yes, it is the body which pounces first, which first has the courage to cast aside all restraint and detachment and hurl itself into the presence in front of it, into the being in front of it, as into a gulf that no one will ever succeed in filling or even recognizing as being there. The body it is which realizes first that pleasure in another may become the completest intoxication that exists. What we learn later follows the same lines, in my mind.”

Bompard was looking at me with extreme curiosity. “You dumbfound me.”

“How so?”

“Not by what you say. But by how you say it, the spirit of it. I don’t remember very clearly how the talk went in the old days, when we got to discussing women and physical love, and quoting more or less freely from our sexual experiences. But the Pierre Febvre in my imagination sounded very different from this one. It is clear however, that if marriage has

succeeded in stimulating you to such a point, merely where physical love is concerned, I am not saying that it quite decides me to marry next time we reach Marseilles, but it certainly interests me. Now—you must forgive me for making the remark, but I feel it is an essential one—do you not think that it depends chiefly whom you find yourself with, and where we are both concerned, on the other ? ”

“ That seems pretty obvious.”

“ Do you not think that in heaps of marriages, the man—since, all said and done, he is what interests us most—is satisfied if he gets, where sex is concerned, the kind of emotion or gratification he is already familiar with, though with slight new differences of course, respectability for instance, which must have its stimulating moments too ; and that often he gets them again less vividly, toned down by cares, sulks, or even quite ruined by the atmosphere of family ? ”

“ Highly probable. But don't forget that the average man in average conditions has emotions which are more complex, more profound, more exacting than he can find words for, or than he thinks. Nor this, that in talk he is perfectly willing to subscribe to ready-made ideas such as the vulgarest jokes about marriage, and yet protects himself against feeling his own personal life has been in any way attacked, for that to him seems altogether exceptional, and something to be kept secret.”

“ Yes, that's rather clever.”

“ And possibly the way marriage is cried down in public may increase its private savour for a good many people.”

I was silent, looking at him laughing. His shoulder and right cheek were at that moment almost resting on the glass, with his elbows spread wide on the hand-rail in a strangely contorted position. His posture seemed to have no reference at all to what he was saying. The peak of his cap, rubbing the glass, made a funny complaining sound. I thought of him as he used to look when we talked similarly at night, at sea, on ships that would probably never carry us again. A strong feeling of comradeship, of liberty, welled up from our situation together. I thought, “ I am really fond of him.”

He turned about, leant back against the bar, seizing it

simultaneously in both hands, standing like an acrobat. "It cannot be denied," he said suddenly, "that in adopting this odd profession instead of doctoring tranquilly ashore, I have deprived myself of one of the great interests—one may even say intellectual interests—of a doctor's life. In such matters as marriage for instance, the truth about conjugal relations, even psychologically speaking, few people are as well informed as the average doctor in general practice. So long as he is not stupid, that is. But I suspect that overwork deadens them—and that the majority get their ideas about humanity, not from the marvellous opportunities for investigation that their professions supply, but from the novels they read long ago on night duty. Well, personally I haven't got a thing out of it. Once or twice it has been necessary to help deliver some passenger. But the ladies in question did not see any reason for imparting to me in what state of grace or lack of grace the child had been conceived. At bottom, people don't trust one. They arrange matters so as to fall ill only when land is sighted. The feeling more or less is, that being a ship's doctor is a duty which devolves on the officers turn and turn about, like taking the watch. Or that it is the way in which doctors condemned by law have to work out their sentences. They ask us for a prescription for a gargle when they have felt a draught on deck. I don't count being sea-sick. The prettiest woman could only document you on the psychology of snails when she is sea-sick. But anyhow, my dear Febvre, you do dumbfound me. Yes, frankly."

He sank into his thoughts ; then : "This idea of a presence, how strange it is, how impressive ! I had never thought about it, at least in that way. So in the love of the married, as you see it, it is that which grows out of it ?"

"Where it deserves it, in my opinion, yes."

"Once the physical act of possession has taken place ?"

"Yes."

"You really think that my comparison a moment ago was not merely a play on words, that a certain degree of . . . sexual eagerness could be interpreted as a seeking for a presence ?"

"Yes."

"I should ask nothing better than to admit it. If only to

throw new light on my own feelings. I must go deeper into it. A seeking for a presence? Yes, for a physical presence, at least, a sort of verifying! What a resourceful mortal marriage has made of you! More than resourceful even. When one thinks about it, it can hardly be called a metaphor. One could find literal justification for it. How funny! A search for a presence within the flesh, which the flesh undertakes. An impatient search which can never think it has done enough, and which is continued until it reaches a sort of delirium. Even the organ itself. . . . Yes, supposing the only reason for its existence was that Nature wanted to endow us with an organ with just such a function, to assure us of another living presence with a certitude much more intimate, an evidence altogether warmer and more poignant than the eye or ear can provide—they having become so detached, so unreliable—what could she have invented more efficacious or more specialized? Ha! You see how fast I'm getting on, how quickly your doctrine is leavening my spirit. Yes, so much so that I reproach myself for not having thought of it sooner. It is due, no doubt, to my ineradicable modesty—and also, with people like me, to wanting physiology to fit in with my theories. The apparatus in question is treated as though it were purely utilitarian and vowed to the service of the species, as though rewarded for such services by coarse animal satisfaction. . . . That we accept as a matter of faith. But if we considered it with no more prejudice than we do the eye, for instance? Does it not strike one immediately that its chief purpose is what you have said? Does not its structure give an obvious preponderance, the place of honour to its capacity for perception, to what serves to prove to us that that other flesh exists, and to recognize that faith? Why, the form itself reveals it. All discovery and exploration, you cannot doubt it! So keen, so exasperated is that sense of discovery, that every detail, every tiniest fold, almost every point where it meets that other flesh corresponds in ourselves to a surge of amazement. We have got used, owing to accepted ideas, to experiencing it rather as a surge of delight. But only by an arbitrary device. Amazement is indeed the major reaction which the discovery of a reality exterior to ourselves would evoke. And there

seems to be no reason why amazement, which happens to be a very keen pleasure in so many circumstances of little interest, should not become, when the object concerned is so important to men, the greatest rapture known to them."

I could not tell how far Bompard was serious. Perhaps he did not know himself. Most probably, he feared being too much so ; so that at every instant he modified by some intellectual subtlety, what was dictated in him by an instinct more profound.

" Besides," he went on, " where pleasure is concerned, it is not necessary to marry to get the most out of that."

" Who can tell ? "

" Ah, you want to catch me. But I'm not having any."

" You have just said very appropriately yourself that, ' When the object concerned is so important to men.' Do you think that a temporary mistress could ever represent that ' so important ' object to you ? "

" If she were very pretty, very exciting. If her body were very beautiful."

" That's something. It is even fundamental. But is it enough ? "

" It should be, since we are discussing physical love."

" Physical love . . . that's the point."

" Oh ! Oh ! "

" Physical if you like. But only on condition that you so widely extend the idea of physical love and open up such vast perspectives that the words end by designating it most inadequately. I would prefer ' carnal love ' even better, because, for me at least, ' carnal ' seems to say more and reach farther than the word ' physical'."

" Are you not somewhat contradicting your last affirmations ? "

" No, I do not think so. If I were keen about going more deeply into what I felt, I should be forced to fall back on words that would certainly make you smile, and by that token, instead of helping us to a mutual comprehension, they would convince you that I had undeniably gone a bit loose on top. Yes, it would seem a little too like your Dutrey and his ' holy father's ' letter."

"Go ahead, old chap. . . . You've already had proof. I shall listen to you favourably."

"No, that would break the contact. You have followed me so far because I have remained altogether the layman. With your experience and exceptional keenness of spirit you might fashion it to your own ends. I am not saying you will either respond very deeply or very ingenuously. And of course a dilettante may find interest in a picture painted by a monk, and enter into it. That is, so long as it is only a question of painting, or even of feeling . . . which can be avowed. But the monk's religious experiences? . . . When his reason for painting may have been to set down some such ecstasy. . . ?"

"Unquestionably, you dumbfound me more and more. Above all, when I think of the Pierre Febvre you were to me not an hour ago even. But I feel quite unusually intrepid. Besides, if one has not slept very well the night before, I find that round midnight one is inclined to be much less picky about the problem of the frontiers between the rational and the absurd. I am all attention."

"No, permit me not to go beyond the conception of presences which has not served us so badly so far. Try and recapture the moments in your love-life when you failed to realize clearly, not that you were enjoying a woman nor that you were using her for your pleasure, but that you were applying yourself, that you were striving with everything in you to feel her nor at least her body, her flesh. And that from it came forth an intoxication altogether new. Then imagine that the intoxication of the presence, instead of lasting but a moment and doubting of itself, as if it were some ambiguous thing, another of the falsehoods of sensuality, widens until it takes in everything and in this way acquires a prodigious certainty, becoming convinced itself that it is as valuable as the sublimest moments of the spirit. Imagine that each hour of your days becomes, as by the expansion of this moment experienced by you, the interminable seeking for that same presence. That other being is before you. Your wife is before you. Not a woman of chance, fugitive of soul like the chance that brought her to you. No, a presence, which by its permanence, its fixity, provides an opportunity for gauging the abyss which spreads in widening circles before

you. Your wife. That being, among all possible beings, whose charge it is to draw you into it, which is put there to create in you and you alone the vertigo of something not yourself, the frenzy of desiring to merge into it."

Bompard had been listening with a simplicity no one could have objected to, and an indulgent expression of the eyes which spared me from feeling ridiculous. I was not displeased to have gone so far in the confession of my thoughts.

He thought for a long moment. Then: "Perhaps that world does exist. Beyond my own. I would like to say 'beyond ours'."

"Why beyond ours?"

"Mainly because I can't forget the being you were; the point from which you set out. The word 'seduced' in its widest sense. It seems to me, in spite of myself, that you have been drawn out of your path, like the heroes of old legends. Your voice comes to me from the farther bank. And it gets fainter always——"

"Truly? . . . Well I told you we should lose contact."

"Besides, it is very disturbing in itself."

"What seems to you disturbing in it?"

"Well, it is not particularly easy to frighten me. I have always been fairly successful in protecting myself from certain manias of my profession (it is true I hardly practise it) such as seeing anomalies in everything and lunacy. And if they do come under my notice, it doesn't upset me. Although I do not smoke myself, I have sat through hours of smoking. I have seen very close comrades devoured little by little by this vice, or by others; and I assure you without any possibility of doubt, the man has dwindled away perceptibly. At times, I have accused myself of not caring. Such things could not make me afraid. Possibly just because that is how vice works. . . . I am not even made curious by it. If not altogether transparent, at least it is surrounded on all sides by the light we know. It does not affect nor change in any way the accustomed horizon. If you like, as far as I am concerned, the only problems it sets are individual ones. It remains a phenomenon. Certain cases of raving passion for a woman which I have witnessed, have, it is true, made me ponder, let us say even

made me feel some anxiety for my friend, but the anxiety was local and spread no farther. But about you I feel differently."

"Explain yourself more fully."

"The impression you make on me is not at all that of a phenomenon, as bizarre as you like, but explicable. The only way I can express it is by comparisons . . . and even then . . . A government, all said and done, is less disturbed by a four-fold assassination, or railway catastrophe, than by some slight pamphlet criticizing the régime."

"You were accusing me of being mysterious just now."

"You see, I am trying to communicate to you an impression that has just struck me, that I have hardly got hold of yet. When things like those you have just said are said to one, a sort of interior gurgling or strange kind of giddiness takes hold of one, which finds expression in the spirit by odds and ends of thoughts such as : 'That should be true and possible. It is even indubitably true and possible. But one must not!'"

"What, one must not?"

"Yes, resist it! Not let ourselves be drawn in that direction. Nor even pay too much attention to it. We should begin to get giddy again. We must pass on unthinkingly, without seeking to make a choice. Everything in that direction is bad."

"Bad?"

"So to speak. Bad like the ideas in the little pamphlet. Dangerous. Opposed to tranquillity. Our personal tranquillity, but also to some undefined universal tranquillity!"

"Are you not being somewhat dramatic?"

"Let us be clear. It may not be a very serious matter for you, not at the moment. The author of the little pamphlet is no worse than his neighbour. But if he happened to be in the right, it would be altogether more serious than a railway catastrophe. For the government. For himself too in consequence. However, you will see."

"But what danger is it exactly you see? Psychological, moral, social?"

"I don't know, old chap. Once upon a time there were inquisitors, and more recently censors, who got their reputations because they could dig subversive tendencies even out of treatises on hydraulics, or sonnets to Clorinda. No one

could tell how they managed to see it. Nor could they. But without knowing one word of Czech, they were capable of divining that a book in Czech was a menace to religion or the State. My merit is very much less than theirs. But what I mean is that I have no need to know where the danger is in order to sense it. Nor for it to be ripe to be disturbed by it. Such an emotion as that which you succeeded in almost making me share with you just now, all my instincts suspect. It may be that far in the distance, after many détours or even side-trackings I do not know of, something may be achieved from which life as I understand it, as I accept it, will draw back in fear. But my feeling is that it leads us there."

"To me, on the contrary, it seems that that is the direction life wishes to take. Obviously the first inhibitions have to be overcome, then one's chief feeling is amazement at the speed with which one goes forward. But afterwards the reward comes, a condition of joyfulness, of entirely reassuring prolonged enthusiasm."

"But does not that amount to the same? I did not say the road was an unpleasant one. Neither do I say that my instinct for life is a particularly heroic one. I do not feel I am made to proceed very far in any one direction. But many of us are like that. There must surely be justification for the moderation of the crowd."

"According to that then, you justify every sort of mediocrity."

He said nothing and seemed thinking, then: "Will you tell me why, when two beings come together, two average beings, eh, their mutual proximity torments them so little? And why each of them is so little intoxicated by the other? On my word, if another's presence is what you pretend it is, I cannot see what stands in their way."

He added: "Unless we have known for all eternity (in a manner of speaking) that that particular thing must not be thought of, nor the things that resemble it. That it is forbidden. Except as a special indulgence, from time to time: three minutes of delirium upon the body of the beloved, which afterwards ebbs away into the flesh and is forgotten almost immediately. Eh? What do you think?"

He added after some minutes of silence, in which the wind, which had changed, began to come in by the open window, no longer evenly and continuously, but by gusts and undulations, like the flapping of some heavy stuff striking against the partition that faced it : " Besides—it may be stupid of me to say this—but it's bound to occur to you, anyway—when one has a profession like ours, does it seem to you that this fanaticism of the presence seems particularly indicated as appropriate in our cases? Would that be the best way of planning out a possible life? "

I turned my head away. He continued : " In that altogether unrevealed world of yours has that been allowed for? "

I had not the courage to answer. I had nothing to reply. I felt the speed of the boat as one feels in one's own body the progress of some mortal organic happening.

He looked at me : " I'm sorry, old chap."

III

I HAD not designed to relate this nocturnal conversation in such detail. But I realize now the difficulty in summarizing it.

For that matter, the importance it has come to assume in my text was possessed by it already in my memory. Whenever I think of this particular period of my life, I see this conversation standing at the very entrance. As one might see in Asia, on the threshold of some avenue leading to a temple or prohibited place, a double pylon, bearing figures, inscriptions, warnings.

Bompard would perhaps to-day be much astonished by the almost awe-inspiring proportions I lend so very simple a conversation. Yet he must have suspected he had moved me deeply, merely from the way our meetings grew rarer in the succeeding days and my seeing to it that we talked only on indifferent topics.

What made it so difficult was not so much that I had laid bare to another my main preoccupations, as that I had myself recognized them so clearly that I could not any longer ignore their implications.

I wanted to push them away. "It's exaggerated. A lot of it is mere words." But entire portions of what I had said that night came back to me and the taste was very bitter.

Before sailing, I had formed a vague idea of organizing a sort of cult of Lucienne in my cabin. And though I had no definite idea as to the form it would take, I had a feeling how it should be. And chiefly I meant to rely on scrupulous observances and a sense of compulsion. Material acts, determined by a certain order and repetition, should aid my thoughts to combat Lucienne's absence, and mingle some sensual gratification with my chagrin. This intimate ceremonial would be, I felt, a continuation of that religion for which during two months my wife's body had been for me both the object and site.

But our conversation had broken the spell in which I should still have remained. I no longer felt in myself the necessary zeal to imagine those rites, or observe them. I felt as though everything were taking place under Bompard's eyes, and almost in public ; and that in any case my first intention had been to endow my sentiments with so exalted an awareness that any subsequent representation of them could only seem trivial.

My feeling turned to a perpetual irritation, a sort of spoilt anguish. I had hoped to suffer Lucienne's absence amply, fervently. I suffered badly, upset by the ill-humoured judgments that accumulated in me.

To such an extent that, renouncing concentrating, I longed for some distraction. Nothing on board could give it me. I hoped to find it elsewhere. I promised myself that arrival in New York, and two days spent ashore, should provide the powerful stimulus I needed.

I knew New York. I had been coming regularly to it over a number of years. Without ever making any particular stay, I had managed to gain a fairly complete idea of it.

New York pleased me. I found it sympathetic. I had seen the ending, or all but, of the period of filth and disorder, the era of logs all planted crosswise across the dilapidated sidewalks, the time when an avenue was merely a chasm made negotiable for pedestrians and vehicles by a temporary viaduct, a chasm perpetually assailed by the continuous thunder of trains rolling along a track of badly riveted planks, among flying cinders ; in which streets with iron staircases hanging from the façades of houses, and refuse bins against the basement air-shafts, were but the shelved and numbered galleries of a population warehouse, yet where certain waterside slums preserved the tranquillity, the friendliness, the damp picturesqueness of some slovenly Dutch town.

The mere passage of a season would see an avenue come into being out of its superstructures. Elsewhere the sky would clear away its overhanging cables. Huge buildings rose into the sky in different places as though watered at hazard by some lightning fertilizer. The air was keen, stimulating

and came straight into the city, penetrating by degrees into the narrowest fissures, benefiting each of the inhabitants. The sea breezes drew attention to the refuse which bowled along in front of me, drying the better-kept sidewalks, the less-torn roads. The sun fastened upon the highest façades and would not let them go, and made you want to mount up to their summits. The need for lifts became a natural stimulant. Meanwhile the Subway Express ran farther and farther into the peninsular to catch up with the new streets.

This transformation of New York had reverberated in me almost like something which had happened in myself. I had found its different phases pleasing. I could feel them coming. In my thoughts I had hurried them on, like a child pushing against the partitions of a railway carriage to make the train go faster.

There was also in my mind the idea that I could always count on New York to act as a tonic—a specific for interior complications—a remedy differing much from Marseilles as to ingredients, but equally efficacious.

What exactly was I expecting this time? Not, surely, a help to forget our separation, nor even to help me feel it less; but rather, a rejuvenation of my general attitude to life. You cannot leave your pain out of your particular vision of the universe. And as that varies, so does it. Without making mine slough off, which I was not demanding, even for those two days, New York could help me to get the needs of my existence back into a natural perspective.

What, in reality, was actually happening? Something disconcerting enough, which I shall try and recapture, even at the risk of some delay, for to me it seems as interesting as my biological meditations in F——-les-Eaux. A kind of interest that I am still trying to make clear to myself, and which I find it easier to intuit than explain. I shall not attempt to bring it to light by working out its causes and effects. But it contains two documents for me, both provocative, and yet of no direct utility, which I stick on my wall to glance at from time to time as I work. In the same way industrial magnates have charts of world production in their offices, as well as views of their shops at different periods, and photographs of the factory

football team ; things which evidently they do not consult in working out their selling prices, but which, indirectly help them perhaps to get the true feel of their businesses.

We had, then, shortly after dawn, to enter the arm of sea which reaches to New York. By evening, I was all clear to have my morning free. I had delegated various charges to my subordinates and got my own work up to date.

For that matter, in those days which so nearly preceded the war, the approach to land and disembarkation was much less troublesome officially, than it is to-day. Still, even then, the American Customs was somewhat difficult to deal with. Prohibition was not however the law. Nor had the police authorities acquired, in a state of war, habits it was difficult to lose later. The immigration laws were easier.

I could therefore isolate myself in a protected corner of the upper-deck between two lifeboats and abstract myself from everything but the sight in front of me. I knew in advance what I should see. However rapid the American transformation might be, I could be certain that nothing essential would have shifted in six months. If I gave it all my attention, I should be able to lose nothing of an effect which I had already experienced. I held myself ready for the known but stimulating reaction.

I had been in that position some fifteen minutes possibly, when I realized that something unusual was taking place between the spectacle and myself. I dare not say that it seemed definitely new, and yet I felt I had to look at it as if I saw it for the very first time. Nor did I feel a hint of the reaction which I had promised myself taking place. Far from docilely offering my back to a sort of invigorating shower-bath, my feeling was that I was defending myself, or even attacking.

In the mounting light of day I scrutinized this very ordinary channel, lying between monotonous banks of earth through which our boat crept slowly. Why, I do not know, but I began addressing curious exhortations to myself. "Generally, you see this all with half an eye. You say to yourself it's a very ordinary channel, that it will get interesting farther on. That's

where you're wrong. You should, on the contrary, open your eyes wide and not be so passive. In a moment New York is going to stun you like an immense blare of trumpets. Perhaps it will be too late then to get a hold on yourself. But there is still time here. The game is still even. You have your discernment, your calm. Attention. Here is where the note of the continent is sounded, a diapason that is all but silent."

What started this feeling of being "passive," of "getting a hold on myself," this appetite for discernment? The idea of judging New York, America, ought to have been more indifferent to me than ever. All I had to ask of this world with which my contacts for the next two days were to be so casual, was merely a short change. Why defend myself against it by judging it, since it in no way menaced me? Would not, on the contrary, the act of judging it risk destroying the salutary effects which I hoped to get from it.

In effect, I was arriving fully armed. I did not argue with myself. I was not weighing the pros and cons. I decided nothing in advance. But as the boat moved down the channel, a series of ideas inscribed themselves on my spirit, as though on the recording cylinder of some apparatus. Their unwinding answered to that of the scene in front of me with an automatic vigilance. There were, so to speak, definite intervals and clicking sounds of release.

"A vastness undifferentiated. Undifferentiated vastness. Dimensions which I accept, but do not feel. Dimensions which, profoundly, mean nothing.

"Sadness? Possibly. Joy, if you like. Sadness—joy, so easy to change round. Secondary and ambiguous products. Sadness—joy, flowing over all things, things, the resultants of their envelopes and assemblage of their parts, not their essences. Neither essential nor spontaneous. The antithesis to the joy of Provence. The antithesis to the sadness of Andalusia.

"An engendering of abundant forms, the first to hand. The menace of being overpowered. Then the menace as of that overpowering ceasing too soon. As if it held within it all the mystery there had ever been."

Something stands in the way of my feeling in a real way the width of this channel of the sea. Had it been twice as wide. or

twice as narrow, would anything be changed? It is impossible to gauge the size of the rocky protuberances along the shores. Vegetation grows on them, and scattered houses. Why does one think, more than elsewhere, how divisible such objects are? And not indefinitely, not to the infinitesimal and vertiginously small. Divisible easily, quickly and within limits. One glimpses a small brownish cube in the trees, in that villa, in the rocky protuberances, and it is rather rugged, somewhat lopsided, neither soft nor hard, between iron and rubber in texture, and everywhere it will be the same and everywhere be reached as quickly.

In the distance, Manhattan began to loom through a thin haze; the mass of Manhattan, still far off.

The boat moved steadily onward, silent now. I became aware of a sort of extremely subtle and abstract cold taking possession of me deep down, as though never again to leave me. I had a feeling as of life tending to become a phenomenon of the surface, as if it withdrew to the circumference of my body, but equally to any other body, as by some general cause, like a magnetic field. The *malaise*—for it was one, though only just appreciable—varied with the part of the organism it affected. In the thorax it was an anxious void, as if the stomach were full of luke-warm air and a swinging puddle of water. In the limbs, a chill, fine and protracted, as though wire ran through all the hollows of my bones.

But suddenly Manhattan looms out of the mist. Manhattan stretching itself and surging up behind the Statue of Liberty. It is vaster, it is loftier than the façade of any known city. It looks like a pillage of cathedral spires and belfries heaped on a monticule, where the navigators of the world might with their eyes seek out some relic of the fatherland.

The boat swings round the surcharged peninsular. The buildings pivot slowly, gliding one behind the other. The tall narrow façades replace each other in perspective by sets of exact equivalents, a hundred windows for a hundred.

An immense upwelling admiration begins to take possession of you. You feel you are going to begin talking to yourself, shouting, clapping your hands, jubilating. Enthusiasm comes to life at a bound and stays keyed to a high pitch of intensity.

Then you become aware that it has risen without involving the depths of the spirit, as though unstuck and blistered. The depths of the spirit remain strangely placid, strangely unaffected.

It occurs to you suddenly that you yourself, could add new storeys where they seem lacking, where their stratification ceases, seemingly without reason. Between the sides of two such buildings, separated by a scallop of sky, you feel you want to slip, like a card in a game, a hundred windows more, and even, why not, yet another hundred.

Yes, you feel conscious of an immense energy, which multiplies, which froths over, which runs to volume. Furiously it multiplies something rudimentary, at the core of which there is no fury. The energy does not turn back ever, its effort is not to intertwine and knit up, it does not expend itself in internally elaborating its structures, nor make any effort to condense and solidify. Its tendency is not to live completely in itself, but to escape. Each of the porous buildings is inviting another to come and blow up at its side, the least quantity of matter to the greatest possible height. A rivalry of tumefactions constructed in haste on the rock of Manhattan, a typical fragment of American unreality.

The boat has hardly reached the pigeon hole in which it will lodge in a harbour nailed to the city like a filing cabinet, before one has resigned oneself already to the feeling that nothing inexplicable now remains for an immense portion of the earth. But why does not the intellect feel more flattered? Why is it not suddenly intoxicated, filled with love for itself, in the way other places with their pyramids and columns make it feel?

It is all too simple, and it lacks a certain intoxication of simplicity. Everything is transparent, but it lacks a certain interplay of transparencies. Everything bears witness to a testimony that lacks fire.

But at least everything is on a grand scale. Nothing is large enough yet. Nothing will ever be. Fifty storeys are nothing in comparison with light-years. The Grand Canyon in Colorado is the muddy bottom of a dried up August pond. When you set foot in the express elevators of the Woolworth building, try not to think of the stars.

And then, as the boat leaves the fairway of the river and turns its bows, seeking its destined compartment in the file, from over the brow of the world there comes, borne by the Atlantic desert, a mirage of Europe. Little by little you begin to discern, scattered abundantly but surprisingly, vastnesses, edifices. Each vastness—and there are all kinds—seems absolute. And every edifice, tight, knotty, secret, slow to reveal itself. A man wanders in a cathedral, and a vault not even thirty times his height protects him completely from the terrifying total of yards of the Milky Way's long axis. The people scattering grain to the pigeons in the Piazza of Venice, and in the act, glancing round the square, are struck by no temptation to apply the coefficient five to every visible dimension. There are certain landscapes, the Mont Ventoux above the yew trees, the Valley of the Var from a window in Gattières, which too, mountain and valley, seem huge, unrelated to anything, out of scale for all eternity. But it is as though their grandeur belonged to them like an inalienable title. Once and for all, they stand apart from a world where the phases of the moon have equal validity with a sliver of orange skin. Wherever the eye falls, it thus finds objects formed in such a manner as to appear indivisible. No plane of cleavage can be detected. You feel no itch to take them to pieces. You feel that you would never get inside them. Even man's own creations hide a thousand secrets from him, and he can meditate deeply and for long hours upon them, without in any way appearing ridiculous. His monuments, his social organizations, environ him like prodigies more ancient than himself. The result is that his pride is continually beset by questionings, half-smiling it is true, and his wretchedness can never thus be utterly complete. There is not, over there, one place even, given up to desolation, since there is not one which has delivered up its all. Vestiges of happiness lie about for centuries in sunny corners, from which no one will ever succeed in sweeping them away, and in such places beggars squat, harder to please than millionaires.¹

¹ All this is, of course, my musing. The effort made by me to reconstruct it does not imply that I actually attribute an objective value to it. The degree in which it proves anything can only be in regard to myself. Similarly for what follows.

After telegraphing to Lucienne to let her know my safe arrival, I decided to spend the first day in New York wandering about rather casually. In the morning I took an omnibus that passed Central Park, in order to see how many more streets the city had stretched in the past seven months. In the afternoon, to begin with, I walked through Canal Street and then thought I would look up an Italian restaurateur whose address I had forgotten, though I knew his place was somewhere in the region of the Bowery. There was nothing I wanted to see him about. My chief object was to see if it were possible to wander in New York, as in any other large city, guessing one's way. I should have been glad to lose myself. I thought of Venice, where it takes three years of daily practice they say, to avoid all the traps set by blind alleys and unexpected turnings. And I was in a part of New York where the lay-out still holds surprises. The streets still have names. You cannot, merely by raising your head, read, whether you like it or not, your exact urban latitude and longitude.

I lost time, though I did not altogether succeed in losing myself. What disconcerted me at moments was the way the streets resembled each other. If you passed two or three blocks without noticing where you were going, there would be nothing to indicate where you were. Nothing to indicate a change of zone or the particular district. Yet with the best will in the world, you would find your direction quickly.

All the same, I could not find the shop I was looking for. I do not think I was off the track, but at the last moment I realized that my memory was not exact enough to enable me to make a choice among the alternatives open. My object slipped away from me and vanished in the sameness of the places round.

I had the feeling that I was escaping from myself also. Not that my thoughts became simpler or less numerous perhaps, but each, after having more or less engrossed me, made a retreat which I did nothing to prevent, and which otherwise was not disagreeable. As though they could, it seemed to me, have retreated further, have detached themselves altogether from my acts, and, apart from me, drawn out an attenuated life. I looked into people's faces. One almost wants to say they are

not thinking at all. But perhaps that is not true. A sleep-walking change must be taking place inside them. The external and apprehended aspect of the individual, it is true, reveals practically no thought, save for those which relate to its current activities. I presume that the remaining thoughts sink little by little until they meet at a certain level, where they course about in their own fashion, as their owners walk through the abstract streets. That is, assuming that they are not transfixed and made lethargic by the cold in the regions into which they fall: that identical central cold of which I have already complained.

"What, in any case, are these sunken thoughts? At intervals, in some cheap shop window, not quite that of a bazaar, nor a stationer's, one catches sight of an erotic object, postcard, print or statuette. Captivating bodies, highly coloured, or others, heavy and bistroed. Those who pass do not turn their heads towards these images. Is that because they are not interested? Or rather, do they serve, instead of stimulating thoughts, to show, as by exits placed along the street, what such thoughts are? But of these hidden thoughts, the eyes about us give no hint. They too form part of the world of activity. They no more bother to express useless thoughts than to take them from without. The dreamer's cruelty and sensuality do not well up to the level of the pupils of these moving men."

It was as I returned from this walk, and was coming round a long square which seemed both desolate and yet crowded, that I felt a sort of collapse take place inside me in the space of a few seconds. Ever since the morning, though unconsciously I had, little by little, been resigning myself to a most unusual and surprising state of feeling.

Anybody who had followed me, or even had assisted at the march past of my reflections, would have thought that New York's capacity to interest me had proved successful beyond all expectation. "Is that the man who, only yesterday, was so obsessed by the thought of his young wife, that he seemed on the point of losing all his liberty of spirit? He is not giving a thought to it now."

But what had come to pass was something like the falling of

a ceiling, of a thin crust of thoughts. A separation, a strange petrification had suddenly ended. "Lucienne." Yes, the happening had the simplicity of a cry, a cry uttered as one falls into some unsuspected cavern. So suddenly did I come again to the idea of Lucienne, that I felt it like a fall.

I turned in the direction of the boat. Although in a great hurry to reach it, the thought of employing a vehicle was repugnant to me. Perhaps I did not want to feel I was starting suddenly in quest of something definite, an actual recourse I had no cause to expect. As I returned on foot, I appeared to be finishing my walk very naturally. All the same, I was hurrying. And as I walked, I asked myself: "Why, just now, was I not thinking of Lucienne? How did that come about?" I said it quickly. My emotion came so close upon my heels that I did not need to think. And as I walked, the city's aspects as I drew near, flared to a sudden intensity like a flame racing in front of one.

At a certain moment I was met by a memory which persisted in accompanying me even to the very boat. A strange memory, which must have gone back to earliest childhood. Once again I saw that picture in black, inside some advertising booklet. It was even more than the picture, almost the thing it represented. A man at a window. He is middle-aged, his head sunk between his shoulders, his back rounded somewhat. He is standing at the window of a house, leaning on a bar. At the foot of the house, almost touching the walls, a railway. The man looks in front of him. The letterpress of the booklet tells how early one afternoon the man was seen in this position by the driver of a train driving his train past that house. At the end of the day, when the driver was returning, he raised his eyes and saw the man still at the window, still in the same position, having made no movement, nor leant back or forth in the least degree, nor moved his elbows on the rail, nor even moved his glance. And indeed, when the picture was examined carefully, you could make out, though how I cannot say, a terrifying fixity in the man's appearance.

I strode along accompanied by this image. It went with me block by block. In the end it became identified in my mind with a present happening, immediate, sensed somehow,

somewhere. To throw it off somewhat, to lighten its burden of oppression, I made an effort to place it in the purlieus of Pearl Street, where the Elevated railway serpentines between the mean and ancient house fronts, like a railway in a backyard.

Once on board I gained my cabin, avoiding meeting anybody. I began a letter to Lucienne. I tried to describe very exactly my reveries and my walk, as though to create for my young wife all my day. But already it had ceased to interest me. What I needed was a tenderness, unequivocal, silent. New York even, offered to Lucienne, fell from my hands. I stopped writing.

I looked at my two cabins with affectionate sadness. Poor painted metal partitions, the rivets visible. I could have caressed them as his master caresses the dog who has waited for his return. There, where no home for me existed, they were my home. There, where everything was distant, they remained something that was near. My presence in a New York street did not prevent New York from being at the world's end. Even the boat seemed to me to have caught the contagion of distance. All save the two cabins. Their narrow confines hedged themselves round, holding out to the last, as if Lucienne in spending the night there, had immunized them against exile.

I began touching the objects. I raised the lid of one of my chests, no doubt so that I might get a whiff of intimacy and possession again.

I saw a small cloth satchel. I opened it. In it Lucienne had carefully arranged buttons of different sorts and sizes. Nothing else. I spilled them on the table. Every necessary kind was there, in reasonable numbers. Not one sort had been forgotten. To have gathered them together thus, a great many special thoughts, much foresight, a great zealousness of spirit, which had not feared to spend itself on such poor objects, must have been necessary. I know I was a young and amorous husband, and so at the mercy of a certain childishness in my feelings. But, by that token, I was less shut up to those emotional truths which our usual pride will not allow us to acknowledge. In fine, the sight of those buttons scattered on my blotting pad completely overwhelmed me. The brutal distress which had brought me back to the boat was replaced by a

calm and melting tenderness, illimitable. For the first time in my life perhaps, the idea of solicitude unfolded before me with all the immensity proper to it. There is an effort at accompaniment in solicitude, a presence which extends in advance as far as it possibly can, which is like the shadow of his own trees for the traveller going from them, alone, at evening.

I asked myself whether anybody had ever had such poignant solicitude for me. (I lost my mother very young.) I found gratification in thinking that no mother, no sister could have done so whole-heartedly. (There is but one chance in a thousand of your needing them, and it is so little, and yet the trifling bother was meant to be spared you.) Wifely love had performed the miracle of surpassing all other loves, even in those fields of tenderness where they belong.

At that moment, pressing against me, was the armchair in which Lucienne had made me sit on the eve of our departure. I saw her again, crouching naked at my feet, her hair spread over my knees. It seemed to me that evocation, far from menacing or corrupting my melting mood, made it even more comprehensive, and brought under the sway of tenderness those realms of feeling over which one never thought it could reign. Caresses which might appear sensual in the extreme, affected me in memory as the manifestations of a most devoted tenderness, and such premeditation as must have been contained in them, as proof of an untiring solicitude. In short, the whole of my body brimmed over with that delicious feeling we experience when the throat contracts, or when the eyes fill with tears.

IV

NEXT morning, I happened to meet Bompard on deck. He said : " Would you like to take tea this afternoon ashore at the house of friends ? I can answer for the people being agreeable. Not the usual Americans. You already know one of them, the lady of uncertain age I introduced you to, who wanted her cabin changed. She asked me to invite you. There will be some younger women, very pretty by the way. What ? Surely a little thing like that won't put you off ? "

Bompard was watching me. I replied in the most neutral tones : " I have some work to do in connection with our sailing to-morrow. But we'll see."

At noon I lunched on board. I found a note from Bompard against my plate. " If I have not come to fetch you by 4.30, I shall have gone straight to the tea party I told you about. Come and join me there. Here is the address."

At 4.30 he had not come. I had a feeling that the complete liberty to stay away which he was allowing me was calculated. " He wants to see. Well, I too, I want to see."

The place in question was situated somewhat beyond West 50th Street, in the direction of Columbus Circle. A most perfectly ordinary house, looking like a cottage, but each floor of which sheltered a different tenant.

Ten or twelve people had arrived before me. Only two or three others came in afterwards. I had never had time to penetrate very deep into the domestic life of Americans. I do not flatter myself I know all the distinctions. But it seemed to me that this interior affected a certain casualness. Our hosts must have lived in Europe, may possibly have frequented artists. Their nostalgia for the old continent now manifested itself in a slight disorder, introduced with ostentation into the solid and commonplace furnishing of the apartment.

The flat in question comprised a certain number of small

rooms leading into each other. The guests talked and laughed loudly. Their clothes were excessively correct, though some of the women were dressed with elegance. One man only was wearing a brown travelling suit, a bright check tie, and smoked a pipe.

I was greeted by the lady whom we had transported as a passenger. But her first "Oh" of pleasant surprise changed to a second "Oh" of polite disappointment. She said: "Why didn't you come in your charming sailor's clothes?"

It was such an unexpected piece of inanity that I felt myself blushing, an accident that never happens to me.

I realized by the expressions of the other ladies' faces that they too had hoped I would come, but with all my stripes. I looked round for Bompard. He was in uniform.

I had not been there very long when a very young woman sat down to the piano and began to sing. There was languor in her voice and a certain wildness. No one paid any attention to her, except a gentleman dressed as if for tea at an embassy, who from time to time offered her a glass full of an orange-coloured liquid, which, though she did not stop strumming with her right hand, she seized in her left and swallowed.

As I had seen her drink four, and as I saw a glass of the same liquid standing on a piece of furniture, I went and drank some. There was orange juice, other aromas I could not identify, and more than half whisky in the mixture.

I walked through the various rooms. People smiled a welcome as I passed. A young woman offered me a drink. But no group made any effort to keep me. I felt I was being treated a little as a looker-on, to the point even of beginning to wonder whether the animation they displayed, the liveliness of the conversation, the laughter and the manner of drinking did not contain a certain touch of theatricality. In my absence, or rather in both our absences, Bompard's and mine, would things have been quite on the same note? It was difficult to say.

Three at least of the women were extremely pretty, with lovely supple bodies which their clothes did little to hide. I reflected that I might very easily not have noticed it. But for the slight challenge in Bompard's remarks of the morning, and the attitude, as though deliberate of the women themselves,

I think the vibration of their femininity would not have reached as far as me. It would not have succeeded in overcoming the quite spontaneous absentmindedness, which, from the time of my marriage, had cut me off from women other than my wife.

But since my abstraction had now been shattered, I had no intention of reimposing it on myself as a penance. On the contrary. I was curious to see how I should react, and the thought of disconcerting Bompard, who was discreetly watching me, only made my situation rather more piquant.

I therefore, with a free glance, looked into these lovely faces, and at the eyes' expression and lips' movements, as they pronounced the murmuring words which women, despite the sense or language, succeed in turning into an elaborate transcription of caresses, veiled but continuous. (And yet we think there is a change in the caress because the voice has changed.) Moment by moment I watched the features yield up or deny, by the way they varied and the shadows that passed over them, the revelation of yearnings, dissatisfactions, pleasures. Nor did I forbid myself to follow the line of lovely shoulders, or encounter the first swelling of breasts, or even admire how a stretch of silk holds in the line of the hips and abdomen, compresses them and draws them gently towards each other, linking and moulding them. Even into that place went my glance. With a sort of poignant veneration I felt in myself all the stores of happiness, of exaltation, they would represent for some man.

Certain introductions had been muttered on my arrival. But I had not caught who the women were, nor to whom they belonged. Where were their husbands, or lovers? In this gathering, no doubt. Why could my eyes not turn unswervingly from each of these women to the men who possessed them, following a link, so to speak, visible? How comes it that the couple is not more manifest? Why does the man not remain close to his woman? Why this pretence to go from her, leave her free? How strange this play of couples at a gathering is! They pretend to vanish away, dissolve. These women's bodies one would think were equally offered or refused to all. The perfection of sociability would demand even that where they bestowed their loves, should be as ignored as whom they

belonged to, and that nothing more should be read into their bodies than that they were the tranquil adornments of a reception. But let me hear it said "That man in profile over there is the husband of the pretty brunette leaning on her elbows," and immediately I experience, like a benefaction which helps me myself to love existence and tells me to be happy, the availability of that woman for this man. The eyes' glow, the voice's caress, exquisitely gathered flesh, memories and promises, a cornucopia overflowing is now inclined towards another. The lovely body is oriented.

Thus the magic of femininity propagated its waves about me, impinging on me from all sides. But if my feelings, which I meant in no wise to oppose, pierced me through with an almost sensual warmth, there was nothing adulterous in them. These women I did not desire for themselves. Not one of my thoughts disputed them with their men, or envied their possession. My emotion detached itself from them in order to nourish an impersonal sentiment of womanhood. It issued to make contact with a female immensity which I felt swelling and billowing like the clouds of an August sky, bearing upon the world with all their sensuous weight. And this universal principle, which I yearned so passionately to relate to myself, the person of Lucienne prefigured for me here below, and was by her made incarnate for my use : Lucienne, through whom my adoration had to pass so that I might attain to it. The surplus of potency, of warmth, which it drew from these lovely strangers, I saw as descending to earth far off and condensing in that absent body, Lucienne, who thus reflected it so much more richly, and with the gleam of a cherished idol. I desired her deliciously, poignantly. I invoked her : " Wife ! " " Being, through whom womankind is mine ! "

My reverie had been intense and swift. Although brought into existence by the surroundings in which I found myself, it had in fact abstracted me from it. I had abandoned myself to a sort of intoxication. But other kinds were being cultivated around me.

One of the young women I had looked at, rose, took a couple

of paces towards me, and said : " And what are you thinking about ? "

" Why, of what I see about me, madame."

" Is what you see so very sad, for you look it ? "

" I, sad ? You much astonish me."

She laughed, with an undulation of her body, looking at me with that languorous provocativeness which certain American women seem to have borrowed from the races in the south.

" What do you think of the women of New York ? "

One of her friends who had heard the question, came and joined us. Then our passenger.

Without giving me, thank heaven, time to reply, the three women began to talk across each other.

" Don't you know that Mister Officer hasn't the right to have any thoughts about the women of New York ? "

" Why not ? Did you tell him he was not to, when you were on his ship ? "

" Oh, I hadn't the right, dear ! I'm too old and ugly. I don't think he looked at me more than once the whole way over, and that was only when I asked to have my cabin changed."

" Oh, he can look all right. He's just been giving Margaret such a look."

" He must have been thinking of something else. Didn't I tell you he was newly married."

" French women must be very jealous then ! Tell us truly. Did you have to swear by everything holy, before you left, that you would never look at another woman ? "

" His wife doesn't have to be jealous, because he's madly in love with her."

Hearing this, the young woman who had got up first, gave me a glance, which in a different place, would have signified : " And I ? Don't I count ? Don't you think I'm as good as your wife ? Would you like me to make you forget her ? " She frowned a little, and strangely twisted her mouth on which a kiss seemed to flit furtively through her mockery and vexation. Then she assumed an air of offended lassitude, and went off to the other end of the room where the piano was, taking her friends with her.

Whereupon someone offered me a drink. A gentleman,

some distance away, seeing me with a glass in my hand, cried out in French, "I'm Irish," and emptying his glass in one gulp, invited me to emulate him.

In the next room Bompard, standing, was talking to a fair young woman. His eyes, whenever they met mine, took on a questioning, intrigued expression. I imagine he would have liked to have had a better idea of what was going on round me and in me.

A little later, the second of the two young women who had spoken to me came back.

"Someone here is quite furious with you."

"Ah, that young lady?"

"No, a different one. Who wants to know whether you are deaf."

"Indeed!"

"I said you were not deaf. Nor blind either. So then she said you were just no gentleman."

"But that distresses me very much. Still, what does she reproach me with?"

"Well, for the last hour she has been singing the loveliest songs, from her own State, specially for you—she comes from Louisiana, you see—quite an hour at the piano. And you haven't been listening."

"Indeed, I have. I heard her when I first came in. I even stopped near her for a little. But she can't have been singing ever since."

"Ah, so you confess. You are deaf. Come along."

"Must I?"

"Absolutely. If you don't obey, something awful will happen."

I had to follow her. Three or four women were standing round the singer, who, for the moment, had stopped singing. Her head was bent, and she seemed to be looking with fascinated interest at two notes on the keyboard which she struck alternately.

There followed a flood of words so rapid that I hardly understood them. Then we were alone, I cannot tell how; the young woman bending over the keyboard, and I.

The room we were in led of course into the others through

an open bay, but the piano itself was in a recess. In addition, the hubbub in the other rooms, which had gone on getting louder, far from lessening our isolation, enhanced it.

She sat back and fixed her fine dark eyes on me. "You know, I speak French very well." (She did speak it well but with a Creole accent.) "And since you talk English very badly, it's absurd of you to stay over there with them. They don't know anything about anything. They've told you I wanted to sing something for you. It's absolutely untrue. You would be incapable of appreciating it. Except ballads and that sort of thing, of course! Why do you tell everybody you love your wife so much. It's so terribly vulgar. So ill-bred. Could any French officer have such bad manners? But perhaps your people are of common origin. And aren't you lying too? You have fine dark eyes, very deceitful, like mine. Why do you leave your wife if you love her? You must know how inconstant women are. My husband is in Philadelphia. You are afraid of all sorts of things. You are timid, timid, timid. I'll teach you how to drink."

She got up. She was of middle height, slim, dark, her face charming and anxious. Her dark eyes seemed struggling with some irritation, trying to stave off by quick flutterings of the eyelids the angry bitterness which possessed all the rest of her. She went and took two glasses, filled them with the orange liquid I had tasted, and held one out to me. "Drink with me and without taking your eyes off me. With me, I say!" (She stamped.) "You're afraid."

She was going to fill the glasses a second time. She showed no signs of intoxication.

"Madame, possibly I am indeed afraid. But a little on your account, if you permit. In France we do not allow young women to sacrifice themselves to such a degree."

"You are ridiculous. Even my husband would not dare to talk to me as you are doing. I'm hungry. Go and get me some fruit."

I brought her a dish loaded with the magnificent and insipid fruits of California. She chose an apple, dug her teeth into it, then put it to my lips, indicating the marks of her bite. "In the same place!"

I had taken the apple in my hand. My glance kept flitting from the imprint of her teeth to the tiny tormented face with its imperiously knit brows.

This combination of drunkenness, infantile sensuality and Bible story I found displeasing enough. It was not altogether empty of charm but it was like an unnecessarily complicated drink, which one only sips out of politeness. Besides my situation seemed ridiculous to me.

I put the apple in my pocket.

"I shall keep it," I said, with all the gallantry I could muster, "in memory of American women."

I thought she was going to bring the whole house down on me. "Give it back."

With a bite, she tore away a piece of the apple which she held between her lips and offered it me thus.

I all but turned on my heels. But she seemed drunk enough to call the whole gathering to bear witness to my prudery, and it struck me they were perhaps counting on just such an incident.

I therefore took possession of the piece of apple with the kiss which enveloped it. "Parlour games," I thought.

The young woman, who had shut her eyes as though to swoon, wanted to repeat the operation immediately. But this time I felt quit.

"Thanks," I said, with the politest of smiles, as if it had been a biscuit that was offered me, "I know the taste."

And I walked through the other rooms to find Bompard. "There is a little lady, in the back room, who is asking for you. You'd better hurry."

He had no time to reply. Our passenger of uncertain age had caught me. She must have seen the vicissitudes of our *tête-à-tête* from a distance, but she was longing to know more.

I repeated before her, that her young friend was asking urgently for Bompard; that I rather thought she was tired a little, and that it would be a good thing if she could get some rest.

Bompard and our passenger decided to go and see. I was getting ready to take advantage of their absence to leave, when they came back.

"My little friend," said the lady to me, "can't get on without you. She is crying. She swears you have deserted her basely, insultingly. She says she would like to go home. But only on condition you go with her. You would not let such a pretty young woman go on crying, you, a Frenchman and an officer."

I had regained all my calm.

"Excuse me, madame, I am an officer of the merchant marine. It is not a very refined body. Only an officer of the State would, I feel, be equal to the situation. In any case, Bompard is altogether more suitable. He's in uniform."

"What can you be thinking of? I assure you you cannot possibly refuse to see this young lady home. I believe that in France too, good manners would demand it."

"Well then, I agree, madam," I replied, looking at Bompard. "We shall conform to the customs of France. And so that there shall be no misunderstanding, please explain to your friend that once she is in the car I will conduct her, not to her home, but to a certain house of my acquaintance in Brooklyn, and that I shall consider it a duty to sleep with her."

The lady jumped a little.

"What is that you say? Would a gentleman in France behave that way?"

"Precisely. With pleasure or regretfully, as the case might be. But unhesitatingly. When a pretty woman, at home, insists on a gentleman kissing her on the lips in a corner of a room, and then sees to it that he accompanies her home, no possible difficulty in interpretation can arise. And no time is wasted either. I shall leave in three minutes."

The lady, pretty flabbergasted, withdrew, as if to report my message.

Bompard laughed heartily.

"All the same, you mustn't imagine," he said, "that the little thing will agree. . . . You know that sort of woman——"

I looked at him with such an amused expression, that he felt he was saying something extremely foolish, but without quite knowing what.

I murmured: "Really, Bompard. Really."

He seemed most apologetic, which avenged me somewhat. The lady came back.

"She isn't well. She insists on your taking her back."

"To the place I mentioned."

"No, of course not. To her home."

"Then I shall pass the night there. Since her husband is in Philadelphia."

"Please don't joke. She is lodging with very respectable people."

"Well, anyhow, have you told her of my intentions?"

"Do you think she could take it seriously?"

"Then she's very much in the wrong."

I drew them towards the piano. The young woman had collapsed into an armchair. She had wept. She smiled at me as to a friend returned at last, who would smooth away her distress. I was sorry for her. I had to restrain myself not to kiss her hair, she seemed such a poor little girl.

"My friend Bompard will take care of you. You'll see. His manners are much better than mine. He's much more open-minded. He knows every kind of flirting backwards, especially the Marseilles sort which is absolutely delicious. Don't forget to ask him. He'll explain it to you in the taxi."

Without giving Bompard time to get his bearings, I disappeared.

V

THOSE two days in New York left a bitter taste in my mouth. There was nothing in particular I had against them, nor had I anything grave with which to reproach myself. But all in all, I would rather have had the state I was in during the crossing.

I came back to my cabin with relief. It was a pleasure to feel shut within the rigid limits of the ship. My first gush of joy came the moment we cast off, drawn by the tugs. When we were out of the channel and gathering speed, my excitement increased. With extraordinary intensity I was thinking of the immediate future, which was joyful. And I succeeded in completely suppressing the future beyond, as one might cover up part of a drawing one did not like.

The speed of the ship was a matter of feverish interest to me. I would consult, on the vestibule walls, the little map on which progress is plotted. I was continually setting problems to myself concerning fogs, currents, and justifications for abandoning one parallel for another. I raked up problems that a seafaring man would no more dream of thinking about than a man who reads would wonder about the alphabet. It seemed to me like some miraculous accident that the dominant winds over the Atlantic blew from the west. They blew in the right direction, they helped to shorten the return crossing. I thought of the earth's movement, of the friction it sets up, of disturbances and viscosities in air and water, of all the resistances introduced by the structure of the earth into my haste to eliminate the space between Lucienne and myself. I would prowl round the bridge. There I would find my colleagues, surprised a little by the frequency of my visits. As though carelessly, I would ask about our speed. What did the log say? What! Only that number of revolutions? Why wouldn't they speed up a bit, with such fine weather? Captain's orders! He thought the engines had been driven rather too hard on the last voyage. Or at least he had let himself be persuaded so

by the chief engineer. But the chief engineer was an imbecile with a savage's superstition for his machines, convinced too much was always being demanded of them, that they were always on the point of breaking down as capriciously as a bursting blood-vessel or a suddenly stopped heart, not to mention his terror of sea-sickness.

I improvised dizzying calculations. My excitement brought back to life again my mathematical nimbleness and the faculty of maintaining a great many equations under my internal scrutiny. By allowing myself approximate co-efficients I worked out figures to show the point at which a lengthening of our route, in order to profit by currents, and avoid fogs, and pass with average risk from one patch of storm to another, would cease to be advantageous. Then I would, as it were, begin gambling with all my calculations, assuming the very limits of probability, as though on a last plank of scaffolding. I worked out the conditions determining our quickest possible return, taking advantage even of quite improbable good fortune, cutting out every risk. You trace the shortest geodetic line on your map. You speed up the machines to run at their theoretic maximum. You treat the problem as if you would strike the only ten days of the year in which the crossing is entirely free from storms, or as if they had arranged to keep out of your way (no question of avoiding them yourself, since no diminution in speed can be allowed). Similarly, fog too is avoided, and if unfortunately you should happen to run into it, why then you just go blindly through, full steam ahead, because it is not impossible to go through without striking something. Everything then having been worked out on these lines, you make a slight adjustment not to cut it too fine nor too much tempt ill-chance.

Thus I performed my functions, prowling round the boat, breaking out ail over in calculations. Unstable, half-formed equations kept on bursting out of me, to work upon the distance and make Marseilles come nearer.

At the same time, and without any interruption in this sort of abstract delirium, without even inconveniencing it, quite different thoughts would make me look at people, stare suddenly into a woman's face, take deep breaths, hum tunes. The

heartiest joy sought justifications in its own image. The weight, the mass of these other thoughts I found exceedingly pleasant. They would have seemed convincing to a stoker, and that thought justified them in my own mind and ballasted me personally.

"A married man. I am a married man returning home. Let our lovely passengers carry on. A sort of love, humble and anxious, crystallizes round them, and their perfumed movements. 'We expect men to beg for our favours.' Seek the beggars that you need. As for me, somewhere a woman is apportioned to me, more beautiful than you are, yet consigned with no reservations, no period of validity. And with a most convincing guarantee by the State. It is pleasant to give ear to animal thoughts. I may land no matter when. My wife awaits me no matter when. The boat may not even be reported. I might land without letting her know. She must be waiting for me. She is ready. All the fondness, the cajoleries, the loving kindness of which I feel so full become thus the most disinterested gift I can give. The love I now know has nothing in it of the anxious suppliant. It is noble and lofty. What makes the great lord? His privilege. What constitutes his privilege? His right to be brutal if he so wishes. Even before I open the door I know she will be there. I can if I prefer, not say a word even, only kiss her and lead her to the bed. I have no excuses to make, no seduction to recommence. She will undress with an assent so beyond all discussion that the thought of the calm smile she will have makes me begin to tremble. 'My wife,' 'your wife,' in such words the whole world recognizes these thoughts. (The joy of it, primal, robust, common!) Suppose I raise up the neighbours: 'I am just back, and my wife refuses.' They would all say she was in the wrong, both heart and soul, and look on her as something unnatural. 'Yes or no, are you his wife?'

A worthy oldish lady, taking her turn round the deck after tea, looks at me in passing. Is there something strange about me? I recognize her. I put her at the Captain's table. If she happened to learn in the course of conversation that the chief steward was married, it little matters whether she be a prude, or born in Boston, or brought up after the manner of "Old England," I defy her altogether to suppress under her

respectable brow a flow of images in which there will be, possibly, a young woman chastely clad, to whom I read out of a book, leaning on a modest Louis XV console, or a cradle over which our two heads bend. But it is a locket which the nail prizes open. Inside, a bed on which the body of a young woman awaits me. A body where I am at home.

I gazed at a window glinting, a copper handrail, the heaving sea. There was the faintest mist on the horizon. "There will be no fog to-night. Full speed ahead." All my coming happiness swooped suddenly, like the dust when the Mistral blows. It showered upon me so compactly that I could not separate it into its elements. Tenderness, kisses on the brow and eyes, adoration of her smile, adoration of her tears and the pain she no longer feels, breasts crushed in embrace which melt into your own, veneration of those parts still veiled, the progress of caresses, sexual rage ; the impossibility of compressing into so short a time so many thoughts laid aside, and so much homage to the silent flesh. The three days would be passed as much in talking as in revisiting the places which had pleased us, in an excursion side by side into the hills, in exactly re-living together a white wall that turns, a cart track outlined in crumbling earth, a blue-green sky, the tiny phosphorescent gleam of a street lamp lit too soon ; eating shell fish at 5 p.m. on the edge of the Old Port, drinking picpoul, or caressing each other, penetrating into each other in the bed, without breathing other than mouth to mouth, without disjoining even in sleep.

I did not avoid people. I talked willingly to them. Bompard alone was an embarrassment. I was afraid he might be reading my feelings. Whether he had read true or false would have been equally disagreeable to me. My attack of modesty in regard to him still persisted, augmented by more recent rancour. But contact with others, their conversation, far from interfering with the movement of my thoughts, gave my feelings at moments an added impetus.

Sometimes nevertheless, I had an anxious need to be alone. The rush of thoughts and visions gave place, little by little, to a single image which took possession of me, and by its composition, its dimensions its own individual life, seemed half-way between a concept of the spirit and an exterior object.

For instance, I would be leaning over the taffrail. I imagined Lucienne at my side, doing likewise, her face turned towards the sea, but her glance falling now on the waves, now seeking my own. I did not lend her any other movement. Even the general expression of her features, though slightly shadowed, was not modified by the calm shifting of the eyes. It was not that I was referring to any particular memory. I did not seek to hear her speak. But the shadow of that face, that glance, absorbed me, and the feeling of that dear creature leaning on the taffrail at my side. All that was lacking was the slightest extra degree of energy to imagine her more intensely. It was an enchanted moment. I had forgotten we were separated, that an immense distance had to be covered before we could be together again. I stopped projecting myself into distance, and that suspension of my impatience itself calmed my heart. But still it was merely an anaesthesia of absence, at most a foretaste of her presence, an aspiration towards what Lucienne's presence, however fugitive, might suddenly have been for me, towards the illimitable consolation she would have poured out for me, towards the way she would immediately have wiped out my every doubt.

Unluckily this crossing took a particularly long time. The excitement of returning could not last as long as the return itself. From morning to morning I became more clairvoyant. Like the beam of a searchlight moving from place to place, my thoughts glided by degrees from our reunion to our subsequent separation. The immediate future let itself be pushed out by the subsequent future. All the courage I had been able to manifest until that moment now seemed futile, and my joy derisory. What good could there be in desiring an end which, hardly had it been attained, I should overshoot? The deception in tolerating, under pretext of seeing its term, an anguish which would in reality indefinitely recommence. Neither patience nor impatience had any justification. As for despair, it was like joy, too prodigal to continue permanently. I finally came to the conclusion that a situation such as mine demanded precisely that form of moral adaptation which had always seemed to me most odious, and felt myself least capable of shouldering, namely, resignation.

VI

All this time Lucienne's notes have been by me, within reach of my hand. I have not availed myself of them yet, though it is a long time since the ship "weighed anchor." I even forbade myself to look at them. I had always sworn to go as far as possible by my own means, and the further I went the more determined grew my sporting obstinacy. Besides, I knew my curiosity would increase in the future. And so it thrilled me to guard it intact till then.

But there was no point in making my task more difficult than it was, nor in turning my back on the end I was seeking, by continuing to deprive myself of such help as her notes might give me.

Ought I, at this point, to consult them, or should I wait a little? More exactly, wait until I have acquired the memories of my three days in Marseilles after returning from New York?

There is, it seems to me, a reason for deciding no.

I do not remember those three days well, or at least, I remember them in a way which seems confused and contradictory. To what is that due? To the contiguity possibly of certain subsequent events. Possibly to the very substance of the memories in question.

If I turn now to Lucienne's notes my own reminiscences will lose their sharpness. They will become valueless, even for purposes of verification. And the period in question, short as it was, is still too important to me on account of what happened in it: my first return to Lucienne and the position that occupies: (just before the main events took place) for us to treat it more lightly than the rest.

Besides, I want to continue on rather different lines than hitherto. My greatest difficulty in dealing with this period is that my memories range so badly with each other. Almost in opposition. Each, and I am referring to the most vivid,

tends to cast its own glow, its own atmosphere over the three days.

Any attempt at adapting them must involve all the disadvantages of such an adaptation. In some measure I should be sacrificing the naked truth to merely the semblance of it.

I shall therefore confine myself to establishing the three or four most vivid and least questionable impressions of those days which remain in my mind. There is no point in linking them together. I am not telling a story. And if each is precise, it will not matter particularly if they seem to suggest opposing interpretations. What follows will decide the matter.

Well then, my first memory of this period of three days is Lucienne at the landing stage. Standing, somewhat sombre, but her face very luminous. And yet, I am not capable of affirming where exactly we met. By the gangway? On the dock? At the foot of the gang plank? What I remember vividly is the extraordinary way the visible world changed for me in that moment. As if, after years of questioning, an immense hypothesis took form. So that suddenly the very thing one had questioned paled everything else by its intense reality. Thus Lucienne's presence, in one operation, took possession of all the reality scattered about the world.

Perhaps it was at this moment, too, that looking at her face, I began to think, "What is the matter with her? What is happening?"—But let us leave that for the moment.

My second memory is going into the bedroom. We had come back from the boat quickly. Our words had come with difficulty. Our spirits had given up trying to use them, took no further interest in them, drew away. We confined ourselves to repeating some two or three phrases, the first to hand, repeating them physically as one might continue to gasp for breath or weep.

Our spirits flowed out elsewhere, seeking an issue other than the mechanisms of speech. Hardly had we had time to recognize each other before we felt as though we were being hurled

towards that room, hunted by the need to come together. Everything that might have stood in our way became negligible or odious. Can I affirm that Lucienne felt this need as intensely as myself? Was she but showing her indulgence for a desire she guessed? In that case she must have played her part admirably, and I have been most blind.

For myself, I was not conscious of reacting to any thoughts of prolonged sensual privation, nor of hastening to recapture a lost sensuality. It seemed indeed rather as though I were continuing, as though I were about to quench, all the eagerness of my return. That whole crossing from New York I now saw as a slow irresistible motion ending in this room. Day by day the ship's travail had wrought a destruction of the space that separated Lucienne from me, a wearing-away of that separation. But the immense voyage, the immense travail could not be complete till I found myself in Lucienne, she too brought to rest. The last film of separation would not be worn away till I felt both our flesh in one and the same place.

I also remember with much vividness and detail the impression which that coming together made on me. From the very first instant of the embrace, a prodigious consolation, a happiness stupefied the spirit, it so stimulated it, cleared away the cerebral truck, and endowed it with the acutest sensation of light any idea can bestow (as if one stood inside a single idea that was like an immense crystal).

This kind of ecstasy over, there came a quite different, most active contentment; as of having at last found the means of expressing oneself, of saying what one had the urge to say. The flow of love assumed features I had never known in it, at any rate, which I had never to the same degree been conscious of. It had become a language in the truest sense of the word, and not as a mere sport of the imagination nor to add piquancy to our pleasure. In very reality I took part in the rupture of that period of engorged silence which had lasted between us since the moment of my arrival. Our joy in finding each other again, the succession of contrasted emotions resulting from it, our mutual confidences as to the distress we had each felt, rage against separation, a refusal to accept as unchangeable the circumstances of our destiny, a promise to combat together the

menace of the future ; even thoughts much more precise, such as affirmations of fidelity, mutual satisfaction, coquetry, gratitude, admiration, idolatrous outbursts, which we could not have found words to express as we felt them, yet which would have stifled us to hold back, were now exchanged between Lucienne and myself in the infinitely graduated movements with which the flesh spoke to, or answered the flesh, during that fullness of intimacy which the spirit never ceases to yearn for in its contacts, but for which even the most intimate conversations offer but the merest fugitive equivalent.

I admit that my exaltation helped to make me add somewhat to the very real potency of this language. Yet the proof was continually before me when I sensed how Lucienne, through her flesh, so clearly seized every intention of my own, responding to or anticipating it, while expressing in modulations as delicate as those of the voice, some tender gesture, some doubt but half sincere, a slight withholding, or sudden abandonment of all in frantic trust, a despairing cry for absolute fusion, an illimitable invasion of her substance, some supernatural attack which suddenly would make possible a lining of all her body and soul by mine.

And at the same time I became sure of something one has always known, which I had glimpsed, but had not verified to such a point, namely that where casual lovers find only the organs of pleasure, a man and wife accustomed to coming together, spouses broken in to mutual possession, begin to recognize by degrees that these organs are the most docile ministrants of loving kindness : a loving kindness, not as one might imagine, animal and abrupt, but exquisitely human, discursive, fed by perpetually changing currents of thought while it pursues its caprices and meanderings to that moment when its pleasure is to daze itself abruptly in bursts of sensuality.

The last memory I think worth noting in this period is also the most important ; at any rate, the one that embarrasses me most, apart from the emotion it calls up. It is what I had chiefly in mind when I decided not to make a continuous and coherent account of those three days.

We should have to separate in a few hours. It was noon. We were about to eat our last meal in common. Lucienne was sitting facing me in the tiny dining-room.

I was taken aback suddenly by the detachment, the mystery, the disturbing quality in her appearance. Once, or possibly twice, before my first departure, I had had a vague impression of something similar, but much less precise, to which I had attached no importance.

The proximity of a new departure no doubt accentuated my capacity for feeling. It robbed me also of the consoling thought that if Lucienne was hiding something from me, I should have time enough delicately to probe the matter. In short, in a few moments I had worked myself up into a state of great anxiety which nevertheless I forced myself to hide. Very usual questions like "You don't look quite yourself"; "You seem to be thinking about something you don't want to talk about?" rose to my lips, but I repressed them. I knew their futility in advance. Besides, I saw it as the first bite, the bait taken, of those "domestic scenes," the mere idea of which has always horrified me, and which, had I not met Lucienne, might have been enough to prevent me ever marrying.

My nervousness, the little time at my disposal, threw a troubled haste into the workings of my mind. Precipitately it rushed to the extremest ideas, as if to make sure of having reached them before it became too late for reassurance, at least in appearance.

I went so far as to think :

"Suppose Lucienne is betraying me, has betrayed me in my absence, or is preparing to do so when I leave, or is thinking at this moment 'This time I shall not have the courage to resist. I know I shall end by yielding to that man who has been pursuing me for days,' etc., would she look as she does? Would she not look exactly as she does?"

Doubtless there came immediately to my mind a thousand reasons to make my suspicions absurd. But I reminded myself that such ideas as absurdity are the favourite refuge of those who are afraid to see clear, and people of that sort I had often jeered at.

"It would be absurd, yes, for anyone simple minded. After

all, all I can affirm most positively about Lucienne is that she is a *grande amoureuse*. Well then ! Is it so absurd after all ? ”

And that little experience in New York. While the drunken American girl was offering me her lips, would it have needed a great effort of imagination to realize that custom and circumstance might suddenly turn infidelity into an amiable trifle ?

My expression must have changed. But even if it had occurred to Lucienne to look at me, our impending separation would explain that shadow and silence. She no more questioned me than I her.

I hardly remember the hours that followed. In refraining from expressing it, my suspicion remained something malleable, of the nature of my reverie. It was amenable to the influence of the passing moment, and more bearable as soon as Lucienne became her old self again. The confusion into which it thrust me, tended to merge in the more general anguish of separation.

As we parted, I felt myself so poor in courage that it was as though I had not the strength even to bear one burden more. “ I must have got things wrong. Lucienne was worried like me. Perhaps she was summoning up in advance some inside attitude of resignation.”

I embraced her tenderly. I smiled at her. I looked at her with all the faith I had. But it did not succeed in eliminating from her face the mysterious expression I could not doubt it had worn.

VII

So it is not as the dupe of my memories that I say that from that moment I had become aware of a certain "mystery" in Lucienne, and that it began to obsess me.

But the moment has come to open the note book at my side.

The inside appears in fact as Lucienne had stated, containing notes more or less elaborated, which appear to have been set down day by day. Yet the writing has the self-possessed appearance of a copy. It is possible therefore that the original text may have been slightly rewritten, or that certain pages may represent reflections interpolated later. In any case any elaboration must have been small. The style is enough to demonstrate it. Clearly it comes straight off the pen. Only at moments does it recall that much more finished and planned-out work, which I read in the past and which ends with our engagement.¹

The book commences at the moment when I first leave Marseilles, "When the ship weighs anchor." The dates are inserted. I shall find my way easily.

Certain phrases catch my eye. They contain words, expressions, which I have myself to some degree made use of in this account. That can only be due to coincidences which have arisen out of the subject. They do not originate in later conversations, which never attained such a degree of precision. These concordances therefore are neither suspect nor negligible.

And as they present themselves, I shall quote such passages as seem to me significant.

HE is here no longer. I go along the rue Saint-Ferréol. It is three hours since he went. The number of hours does not matter, nor the time still to elapse. I could not imagine how

¹ *Lucienne.*

these three hours would manage to elapse. Yet they have. For all that, I find myself quite unable to imagine that the next three will pass, and the three after. I think of things I used to read about hell, long ago. Now I have some conception of what eternal suffering might be. A suffering such that its duration is irrelevant. Suffering such that even the hope it will end means nothing. So I say. And it is easily said. But if I believed Pierre could never again return, I should surely not have the strength to go along this street. So my suffering might be heavier. Yes, but I have to use my reason to admit it.

It is the first time in my life I feel abandoned. I have parted from other beings. Sometimes it made me sad, sometimes relieved me, nearly always it was both. Never a sorrow without some compensation. Never was my existence endangered, attacked thus at its very roots. Abandoned. I say to myself that I am abandoned, as someone coming from the doctor goes on repeating "consumptive, consumptive."

Yet he has not "abandoned" me, really "abandoned" me in the sense one understands it in love. Suppose I try to imagine it a little, the letter on the table, the break, the irrevocable abandonment. Isn't it a terrific consolation to be able to say to myself that at this very moment he is thinking of me and loves me; that if he has abandoned me it is in spite of himself, and that he too is torn by it? A terrific consolation. Yes. That must be admitted too.

I come back home. I detest everything, above all my own movements, my limbs. I realize that no particular state of feeling is valid in itself. Every other moment some object stands in my path which would have pleased me passionately when with Pierre, the corner of a street, a fruit shop or a drapers, a vista of the port. I scorn them. I do not even scorn them. These things fall away from me, one by one, and collapse emptily, indifferently.

"How humiliating that an intellectual, educated, modern girl should be so utterly dependent on a man." I hear a small, strange voice murmur the cutting words inside me. It could find plenty else to say. There is not a trace of self-esteem left in me. Without Pierre, I no longer exist. It is neither

more nor less humiliating than feeling your head swim, because you have eaten nothing for two days.

I cannot understand how people can accept so easily abandoning each other, people who love. You hear them say, "He has gone away for a few days:" "He is travelling:" in the most natural manner. Yet even at that moment the frightful thought must be present in their minds: "Once he is out of my sight, what guarantee have I that I shall see him again? Anything may happen in that immense waste I do not see, cannot guard. Once he is out of my sight, what guarantees he still exists?"

"I feel lonely without him," "without her." As if it was merely a matter of some less degree of comfort. They are not so happy. Everything seems duller. Life seems less worth while.

It is so much more tragic than that. One has a right not to love anyone. It is not at all unnatural to arrange an existence for yourself in which there would be place only for friendship and sympathies (Marie Lemiez), for lively attachments even, for what are called the passions even. But not for what I call love. If one loves another, it is no more possible for him to abandon you than for you to abandon him. His absence is intolerable. Or if it is not, then one hasn't even begun loving.

I want Pierre here! My dear companion, my comrade, my husband. The names I have for you mean exactly that; the creature who cannot abandon me, who ought not to be able to abandon me.

If he were here in person, everything else would be all right. I would be prepared to accept anything, a room in which we should both be ill together, a prison cell in which we should both be locked, a boat into which we should both have been cast with but one blanket, one scrap of bread; a dungeon in which we had to die. All this I would accept, and not in a spirit of martyrdom, not thinking myself heroic. Because that would be better than this. "Are you there, Pierre?" I should say. "Are you still there?" I should

clasp his hand. And if he could not reply, I should hear him breathe.

I remember a nightmare I have sometimes had in my life. A feeling of being impelled forward in some sort of colourless cloud. No ties of any sort hold you back. What terrifies you is not so much the thought of what is going to happen to you, the fear of some danger still unseen, but that the immensity should be so unfamiliar in just those very aspects where you are in contact with it.

It is thus I wander through absence, I am cast into absence and sink. The absence to which Pierre has abandoned me. If I said "Pierre's absence," "his absence," it seems to me it would sound too warm, too kind, that it would not answer at all to the nameless greyness, the muted lustreless vagueness of my distress.

A more piercing anguish than this there cannot be in the wide world. How do others manage to endure it? I do not think I am more susceptible than most. But then, why is so little said about absence? Nothing else ought ever to be spoken of. It ought to be one of the greatest sorrows, one of the greatest curses known to the human race. Everything in life ought to be arranged so as to combat or avoid it, get round it in every possible way. I cannot believe that it makes others suffer as much as it does me, since they seem so resigned.

Or else people suffer without ever having really thought of it. That idea seems significant suddenly. "Without ever having really thought of it."

I listen to the clock striking. I have to urge myself for a long time before gathering the strength to rise.

How could I have allowed him to go? I have heard stories of women who lay down in front of trains to prevent their husbands going. And what did I do? Did I make it clear enough that I should fear nothing, if he stayed? That he could give up his occupation and that I should be happy to lack everything with him?

"We shall never abandon each other." It is an oath sworn.

I envy those who pronounce it, and abide by it. Is what is called necessity ever so compelling as to justify separation?

I pass the mornings thinking what ought I to have done to prevent ours, what must I do to hold him when he returns? Then, little by little, I lose courage. I know he will not want to give up his job; I know I shall not ask him to. Then I despise myself.

I force myself to make my toilet as if he were here. But I have to issue a separate order for almost every gesture. Otherwise I should not even trouble to dress my hair. I look at myself in the glass. But I cannot see myself.

At noon I force myself in the same way to eat at my usual place. The little table seems to me like some fevered vision. The maid brings in the dishes. I cannot get used to the thought that she brings them in for me to eat. I watch the steam rise. I wait. It is as though my waiting, and even the waiting that objects express, cannot remain unanswered indefinitely.

One thing I have longed to do since the first evening, but the presence of the maid prevents it. I would like to lay Pierre's place, his napkin, his piece of bread, arrange all the objects on the table exactly as though Pierre were eating with me.

At that point a thought comes back which I have had many times these last days. It is something even vaguer than a thought. Yet it disturbs me profoundly, though filling me with confidence and hope. When that goes through me it seems as though there is a justification, still hidden, for believing in a kind of infinite providence, which some day, if I deserve it, I shall see closer at hand.

As the day progresses I feel accumulating within, what I have secretly named to myself the "nuptial void."

There is one question which ever since his departure, and even before his departure, has never been far from my mind, out which I have avoided putting frankly to myself: to which, in fact, I have avoided trying to find an answer. Yet I must try. I cannot always go on juggling with that question.

"If I were not his wife, in what way would the situation at his moment, be different?"

And assuming I love him as much as I do, but that our separation had taken place before I had been united to him, even once?

But I perceive that the question, put thus, is meaningless.

Without that union, I should not love Pierre as I do. My love was entirely refashioned from that moment, and its whole substance kneaded anew. To imagine it now without it, would be to endow it with a different substance, to indulge in dreams that have no meaning.

And yet my question is not absurd.

What did it mean? This chiefly: "Has that union made our love stronger against separation? Stronger or weaker?"

And while I ask myself that question yet once more, I feel that strange nuptial void augment within me by degrees as the day advances. It is almost pain, almost anguish. It is really a sort of distress, if you prefer. But it is sweet too!

Beloved union that I adore and venerate. I must have courage and cruelty too to interrogate myself thus and thus to doubt. Union through which my life was begun again, which was a birth to me, which created, that I might inhabit it, a world of delights, which the "nuptial void" augmenting within me perpetually recalls to me.

That question besets me unceasingly. Is it even more serious than I said just now? "Have not overwhelming desires and vast hopes been perverted, monopolized and then betrayed? Has not a promise been made, that could not be kept?"

Union most precious, union worthy of adoration, forgive!

I must come to an understanding with love. I want to find again what I thought, intuited of love, when I was a girl. What it meant to me when I first experienced it, what it promised and foretold me. But it is not easy to reach back to my heart as it then was. I can hardly remember how I realized I loved Pierre. It was so strange, so unlike what my reveries had been. For there was indeed a kind of ravishing

in it ; I did indeed feel carried away, torn out of myself, delivered from myself, and that ecstasy did not belie my expectation. But also there was something there that was like a sentence. I think of a nun of ecstatic faith, who, afflicted by some mortal malady, feels the Creator has marked her for his own, and is sure of being united with Him soon. It is in truth a joyful transport that she feels, and yet she has not forgotten that she is condemned, not only in her own life, but in all life in all the aspects she has known till then, and that her approaching felicity must be paid for with annihilation. Yes, I, like her, felt called to another world, and tremblingly I entered into it.

And afterwards, what happened ? Once again nothing of what I expected took place. I want to punish myself for having dared write these words. But what was I expecting ? Have I anything to complain of ? No, I have nothing to complain of. Such marvels took place that death only would have been a fitting sequel. But marvels altogether different from those I had expected.

When was it I began to think of what I call " the kingdom," or rather, perceived that the road I followed led there, and not elsewhere ; or there first, at any rate ? When was it I first discerned the dizzying horizon of that land into which I was about to descend, into which I was about to fall in the time of harvest and intoxications ? I do not liken myself to the traveller who has lost his road. In no wise. But the traveller may have foreseen or intuited how the road would go, what he would find after the ascent. Instead of a high plateau given over to wind and sky, he finds a deep valley, warm and lush.

The nuptial void, my affliction and yet my joy, invades me by degrees, from hour to hour, as evening falls. Even when I sleep it will not go. It insists that I shall be conscious of it always, yes, even when I may be thinking other thoughts.

I love that sweet suffering. I am proud of it. I should be much distressed to find it had abandoned me. In the morning as I wake, I do not immediately find it in myself,

and then I am troubled. But soon it comes to life, at first imperceptibly.

I am not deceiving myself. I know what it means, what it calls up. Pierre's absence in me. My husband's place in me. I am not ashamed to feel he has a place. Why should I be? What would be shameful on the contrary, would be if that place had already ceased to be his, to belong anew to me, to melt and efface itself once more in the common feeling of myself.

Whereas the anxiety I experience corresponds to a murmur which would perpetually say to me "He! He who is no longer present. He who should be present." And it seems to me as if all my being envelops the absence of my beloved and finds words for it, reproaches itself for it.

Towards night, the nuptial void glows more and more. As in our union I came to feel myself utterly possessed, so now I feel dispossessed to the very extremities of my body. "Sweet husband, your wife, in every part of her is missing you."

Pierre one day said it to me and it is true. "I am not really a sensualist." It was not sensuality I sought in "the kingdom," and it is not that I miss. I so little sought it, so little lay in wait for it, that I had in a way to think about it, to perceive that this too, with other gifts of love, I had, and brimming over. But I have always disliked particularising it, and it makes me blush to name it separately. I am sorry for those women who, it is said, expect it as some capricious conjunction of circumstances, and who nevertheless believe they love.

For myself, I had built up such an idea of that union that—strange as it may appear when I write it—nothing physical could have prevented its accomplishment from being an ecstasy. I believe that even if Pierre had had mortally to cut into my breast to unite us, I should still have been delirious with rapture.

I question myself about this matter, but always with a feeling of humble and tender reverence, and the fear of sacrilege. In the very moment I whisper to myself: "Where has

it led me?" "Oh soul, has it not seduced and betrayed you?" I feel myself bowed down suddenly with gratitude. I re-live the exaltation that seized on me as I stepped into "the kingdom." I tell myself that it was worth every ransom it could cost. And even if I came to believe that the sweet idol had drawn me from my path by a lure, I should still prostrate myself before its feet.

I begin to discern what I had always expected of love. To see me then, could anyone have taken me for anything but a calm, reasonable, sensible girl? Such I believed myself. And yet incessantly I was preparing myself for prodigious happenings, preparing myself patiently and modestly, without desiring to name them in advance, without even thinking of them, as one who is certain they will come.

And though I never thought much about them either, I was always certain love would introduce me to a world of wonders, that one day the sign would be made me to enter in.

Then a day came when, with practically no warning, I was led to the gateway of the realm. Suddenly I had a feeling as of wonders. Yes, even before entering I made obeisance to a world of wonders. No longer did I ask were there not others, or was it indeed that world revealed in prophecies (my own). There I flung myself, I called it my promised land, my fatherland.

How much of that was true? I must think courageously about it all. Was I duped or no?

I have but to re-live those days in which we were both overwhelmed, Pierre and I, by the adoration which swept us off our feet and bore us up. I could not have been duped. I was, as it were, summoned by some near mystery. Never yet had there been so short a distance between myself and something greater than life. The kisses, the caresses I lavished on my beloved were dictated by the most imperious orders my soul had ever received. The more their progress drew me on, the deeper I felt myself approved.

And the union itself, what can prevent me confessing that for a time it was altogether successful in making the absolute conscious in me? I mean that it seemed impossible to me that any human creature could demand or hope for more.

I believed I was living at the very summit of my woman's destiny. Doubtless no one will understand this. On reflection it astonishes me too. Spirituality has always been so important to me. Had I the right to consider, as the summit of existence, an activity which the body, it would seem, is alone able to gauge and arrogate to itself?

I think that at that moment I had, as it were, a clear illumination of love. I thought I could clearly read that what love had promised me was to ravish me from myself and link me with an adorable existence in which my own would be annihilated. In the accomplishment of which it redeemed its promise. In Pierre's arms it needed no effort to tell myself that the body of the well-beloved represented, as far as I was concerned, the whole of existence: that it was the very form that all adorable existence must assume in order to seek me out, and strain me to it: and that if union came about through the enlacement and interpenetration of the flesh, to me it was merely the proof that I had not dreamed or suffered illusory transports of the soul: that it equalled, in reality, what were the least imaginary things of this world, such as the laboured earth, the rooting down of trees, the flesh of fruits.

It was when the time of separation came near that my doubts began to be born. If I could, I would go a long way back to destroy them in the seed. But what would be the good? Could I prevent them from possessing me now?

I cling to the promise that love made me. I cannot get it out of my mind. To unite myself with Pierre. Melt into him. My soul leaps forth so eagerly for this that it would have to be shattered to make it recoil. I have altogether abandoned myself. No woman could have consented to the union more fervently than I. And yet I am alone, I am separated; perhaps more alone and more separated than anybody else.

A wild thought comes to me, dictating to me with separate authority, like a thought sure of itself. I tell myself that in union the soul finds an exaltation too intense, a sense of its own capacity too keen for anything so gross, so absurd as distance, to be enough thereafter to wipe out all.

I am clearly aware that superficially what I have just said means nothing. But deep within, I hear it like a proof.

The servant had asked for the afternoon off. I said she need not get in until nine ; that at dinner I should wait on myself.

I lay the table deliberately, meticulously. I try to place all the things as if for a meal in the first days of our marriage. I lay a place for Pierre, his napkin, his piece of bread. The bottle of Corbières pushed towards him, so that he can reach it easily. He pours out the wine. The water jug is on my side of the table.

I have prepared the dishes of those days. I have flavoured them exactly to his taste. His tastes are very like my own. I like what he likes. Still, he likes his food more highly seasoned.

I unfold his napkin. I place his knife and fork as if his hands were just about to raise them. I am about to serve him. But then I think that it is he who is going to serve me, that he will like doing so, I pick up my plate. I murmur : " Pierre, serve me." My plate remains out-stretched. A sob rises from my breast. My plate falls back on the cloth. I feel rent from top to toe, in one operation, like a piece of stuff. " Pierre, why are you not here ? Nothing else has any meaning now. Nothing else is possible now. I cannot resign myself. Be with me and I ask nothing more. I swear not to ask anything more. See, I am all small. I disappear into my happiness. I am so happy that time no longer passes. I fear nothing any more. I no longer believe in death. I feel as if I had the power to keep our lives immutably fixed in happiness. If you were here, if you could touch the plate I hold out once more, and put my portion into it ! If you were here ! "

I do not want ever again to let him go without me. I do not want ever again to agree to physical impossibilities. I have no use for my body if my body prevents me following him. Pierre, take me. Take me differently, since the way

you took me has not sufficed. I do not want them ever to be able to separate us again. Is there no way I can hide inside you, your body? I want to be your little one, your little one still unborn, that you would carry, that no one could take from you without cutting into your flesh and killing you.

I have come to hide in this tiny, dark, almost airless cupboard. Outside the autumn day is hot. Here it is stifling. What does it matter? Why not stifle? Perhaps the thing that draws me here makes it necessary for me to stifle. I have come to this place because, since Pierre went, I have kept a flannel garment that he wore here. I hid it so that the servant could not put it in the wash. He wore it on him, on his skin, two days perhaps. That week it had got colder. But the afternoon turned warm again. We felt hot walking. When Pierre embraced me I could smell his throat and chest. How happy that odour made me. How it contented me. One instant was enough for me to begin imagining a different sort of existence for the human race, a life in which it would be found wise and necessary to spend much time smelling the odour of the beloved being, in having it all round one, in finding words for its inexhaustible charm, in giving oneself up to its power, its decrees, its fascination, and in which what are called interests would seem futile.

When my head had moved away from Pierre's throat I had become able to keep my contact with his odour. As we went on walking there was no interruption in my feeling of how delicately it touched me and insinuated itself in me.

How precious that garment which smells of him is to me. Had they tried to take it from me, I should have fought for it, as a dog who loves his master would have fought for it, lying on it, rolling over it, drunk with rage and love.

Now I bury my face in it, shutting my eyes, snuffing deeply. In secret, in a cupboard in which I stifle. My head swims a little, but swims in the odour of Pierre.

It is like him. It is much more than like him: it contains him. In his odour there is not only the unique, the incomparable substance of his flesh, the diversity of his flesh, that the

heat went seeking everywhere, and gathering up, but also his movements, his acts, power, joy, way of laughing. I press the garment to my face. I press my husband to myself. I suffocate for him.

One idea keeps on recurring, which flies when I want to grasp it. An idea for which there are no words, which words frighten.

Then I pronounce within myself things like "But I ought to realize, reflect, have the energy to think it out fully."

It seems to me that if I wanted, I could succour myself. It seems to me that the remedy is in myself, but at a certain depth. I feel a coward. I accuse myself of lethargy. I am convinced that everything is a question of courage or lethargy. But most of all of arduous clairvoyance.

If I compelled myself to think with all my might what separation was, I think I should then have some power over it.

Do we not let ourselves be taken by surprise by it? Do we see it soon enough? When the final phrase "We are parted," becomes flesh, the boat is already leaving the dock, the forms of those who go can no longer be distinguished, and separation has become something too huge, too invincible. Should it not rather be combated the moment it begins, before even a name is put to it?

It began the moment Pierre does not hold me quite so close. When his arms relinquish me then is when he abandons me. And that is the moment when one ought to be most attentive, and as the distance widens, more jealously scrutinize the occurrence, not for one instant ceasing to sense the well-beloved, though distance by degrees is taking him from you; or so arranging things that the link relaxes but does not snap, while all the time learning to maintain contact in order to keep touch from ever greater distances. . . . in fact, do for all his presence what I tried to do for his smell. Yes, it seems to me that it is a little the same thing. That one ought to be able to succeed in doing it in much the same way. But you would be dealing with so much more distance. A concentration, despairing, hyper-acute, is what would then be needed.

And then, am I sure that the proper stuff has gone into our contact to enable it to be drawn so thin without tearing, or to be charged with so much separation? Have we informed it with something that will resist separation? I try to re-live our contact, and seek it in those moments when it was its most perfect. As when we talked most tenderly? But then the words mattered to us. When we looked at each other in silence? But soon our lips drew closer and then joined. He pressed me in his arms. And that embrace sufficed but for an instant. Then I must think of the nuptial bed, of the closest intermingling, when not even a morsel of linen can be tolerated, when even a scrap of ribbon attenuates the embrace. Breath intermingles. Brow rests on brow. And an exchange takes place of such a nature that for a time a whole region of two bodies, profoundly, glowingly, belongs indifferently to both. What more can one desire? What is lacking? Brow against brow. Yes, the two heads seem to be seeking each other also, desiring each other too. They support each other. And the souls, are they not marvellously uplifted? Yes, they profit too. But I ask myself if thereafter they do everything they can?

“Somewhere Pierre is in existence.” That is what I have been telling myself ever since this morning.

Pierre has not vanished, nor ceased to be. He is in a certain part of the world even as I say it. Therefore I should be able to reach him, rejoin him somehow or another. Since he is at this moment in existence.

Where are you Pierre? I, your wife, your Lucienne, want to know where you are, I should be able to find out without help. Yet——

Before he went, I made a note of his probable course, day by day. But the ocean is the most deceptive of all places. It cannot with any exactness be divided into stages. I cannot, referring to a chart, say “That is where he sleeps to-night.”

The ship will arrive at New York in two days, exactly forty-nine hours that is, if there has been no delay. Pierre told me what the usual route and speed would be. I see on the

chart the place where they ought to be. Far to the north-east of the Bermudas, and a little to the east of a great depth, indicated in dark blue.

Pierre once told me that before long wireless installations will enable all ships, no matter where, to exchange private telegrams with any spot on earth. He went on to say that that invention was made expressly for us, that its future would march parallel with our own, that sailors' wives could never have desired a remedy more efficacious against separation.

I think of that at times when I need courage. When that day comes, it may be separation will become less oppressive, less sombre. It will not weigh upon me in a solid block. But I am not sensible enough to be able to content myself for long with three words on a sheet of paper. At first, no doubt, I should jump for joy. But could he telegraph to me every day and not spend everything he earns. And even if he did telegraph every day? Suppose more than that even, that he is travelling in France or on the Continent and that he writes me a long letter every day.

A thick heavy letter which would be delivered to me every morning, which I should have been waiting for all night, in sleep even. My dreams would have been complicated, upsetting, another way of waiting for that letter. I should count the sheets. I should look to see if the lines were close together. I should read the letter very slowly, returning often to certain phrases. Then I should read it three times an hour till evening. I should repeat fragments to myself.

I must not be so lacking in faith as to mock this daily letter, which the conditions of my own separation make impossible for me. Even if it were only a way of getting round one's anguish, it should be as great a relief as tears. But, personally, I shall never know that. "Am well. Kisses." Later perhaps, it will come, not every morning, but twice or three times during a crossing, at any hour. My heart will leap with joy, and contract immediately : my throat too. The words will be a flash illuminating my abyss, which at the same moment reveals all its depth again. My sort of soul does not easily accept substitutes.

I got the telegram he cabled to me from New York "Good crossing. Loving kisses." It caused me much more joy than I had anticipated. I pressed my lips to each word. I cried. I re-read it often every hour. Even though I knew it from the first second, I found the means to go on learning it by heart until night.

Now I have rejoined him, however slight the degree, I do not want to leave him again. I wish to follow him.

New York bothers me. With what Pierre has told me of it, with the photographs I have seen, I could perhaps visualize that city. But what would be the good? Through what street is Pierre walking now? Is he in the street or in a house? Is he on the boat?

I do not wish to invent all those answers for myself, at hazard, Everything that is too obviously imaginary, repels me. I shall wait.

They have left New York, probably more than an hour ago. Even if there were some delay I feel sure Pierre is on board again, and almost sure that he is working in the first of his two cabins. But why should there have been delay? I can only think it is because the ship has left New York and is proceeding slowly down the arm of the sea which Pierre told me about.

I feel very calm. Any agitation, any anguish I might have felt these last few days, has left me. How long will this tranquillity last?

It is night. But I have neither closed the shutters, nor drawn the curtains. The lights of Marseilles shine away into distance. An electric light bulb illuminates the dining-room where I sit. Far away, the ship is steaming onward in the full light of day, it may be in full sunlight even. The discrepancy does not trouble me. In my room, moderately lit, I am admirably situated to think of the ship moving onward in full sunlight.

I know it. I have gone over it. I took careful note of how everything was arranged. When I got back that time, I scribbled some small drawings and plans so as not to risk

forgetting it. But I do not need them. I see the ship again without any effort, very clearly, with much precision.

There are days when one is capable only of evoking vague, uncertain images. The image of what it is desired to see reveals itself at instants only, and strives to profit by the least weakening of attention, the spirit's fatigue, to escape.

To-day, I feel that there is nothing similar to fear. I do not therefore have to hurry. I think of one, and then another spot on the ship, as I please, and linger in them, and do not tell myself my memory may suddenly cloud over, leaving not time enough to see at length what most matters to me.

Everything remains clearly defined. I formulate the general aspect of the ship to myself, the super-imposed decks, the passageways, the stairways, the order of the public rooms. I find Pierre's two cabins easily under the first-class deck, at the entrance to the left-hand passageway, looking in the direction of the information bureau at the foot of the main staircase.

Very clearly too I call up the arrangement of the two cabins. I see the table at which he writes, the armchair, the window, the particular device for shutting it. In the cabin he sleeps in, I work out the positions of the bunk, the wash-basin and its two taps, and even the three electric bulbs.

I recall what he has told me of his habits on board. If I had to, I have a feeling I could write down the way he spends his time. At such or such an hour he should normally be in this place, or that; pass here, or there. I see a door again, with a sort of bar to hold by, ending in a ball. I have said to Pierre: "Between nine o'clock and a quarter-past you will assuredly pass through this door. You will touch that ball."

To-morrow, taking into account the boat's progress and difference in longitude, I can calculate our time here when he passes through that door. I can tell myself "That ball that I have touched myself, whose contact I recall, is even at this moment being touched by him."

I do not want to sink back again into the thoughts I had last night. It is not at all what I am in need of. I am not

trying to pass the time by embroidering on my memories dreary game. But even if I wanted, I could not recapture to day that precision in my memories which characterized them yesterday. I should perceive but fading images in confused light, more remote than ever.

For yesterday too they were remote. I realize that suddenly there is a perspective of the spirit. Those images of the boat, so clear, which yesterday I evoked for myself, were, as said and done, extraordinarily reduced. (So much the worse if what I have just written conveys nothing.) Nothing was really close to me. Nothing above all was to my measure. Not one of the places I perceived could have been around me such as I am, or have allowed me to enter.

I am talking nonsense it may be. But I have a feeling that a different state of things should be possible. My instinct tells me that the spirit can do better.

It is about the time now that Pierre should go through the door, and touch that hand-rail and that ball. So be it. I tell it to myself as though it were a piece of information or news, affecting me of course, but from which nothing is to be deduced.

I have closed the shutters and drawn the curtains. I am sitting comfortably in my Provençal armchair. There is nothing to distract me. About me there are only quite ordinary objects, and the lamp lets them sleep. The noise of Marseilles are muffled. Possibly they accompany me, but they do not claim my attention.

I am not altogether clear as to what it is I am looking for. But I know that what I do not want are those vague images situated at the very limits of the spirit, which float in confused light like a rag out of a window; those fugitive and tiny pictures which a moment's inattention is enough to lose.

Neither do I desire those very clear and complete memories which can be called up at will, too small also, fictitious unusable like those of yesterday. I expect nothing from them.

The ship. I must have it close to me, to my measure. I must be in it, almost. I tell myself I must be, absolutely

My lids are closed. But my brain is lethargic. It tries to slide out of what I am asking it. It would rather dally with the first thoughts that come.

I raise my eyelids. A carving on the sideboard has in the lamplight become very important. If I let myself go I should contemplate it for a long time. I feel no need to find out why it interests me. It seems to relate to nothing. There is no mysterious significance to be attributed to it. But by degrees it has assumed all the majesty of an object. Perhaps it makes me glad to have an object as a witness at this moment.

Have I found strength enough to evoke a clear picture of the ship? Yes. I see it. It is not enough to see it more or less. I must be there. Be there enough to be able to verify. Must strive to be there. And then see everything there is without further need of effort.

The handrail of the gangway which sways under my hand. In the floor iron traverses. The stays which give a little. The roofed-in deck and dark shadows. I am going too quickly. It is becoming vague again and arbitrary; too much as if things were as I wanted them, lacking compulsion, not inevitable in any way.

Draw back a step or two; let my foot be still upon the gangway. I shall not move on to the deck until I am certain of everything.

Something is missing. Between the end of the gangway, which rises and moves a little, and the deck of the ship, I see a metal plate, with tiny lozenges in relief, which drops from the end of the gangway to the deck. I place my right foot on it, then my left foot on the deck and my right foot on the deck. This time I am on the ship without any mistake, prepared to examine more closely the shadow in front of me, to recognize my way.

But I begin to feel tired. I stop.

I wanted to wait for the same time as yesterday to come round again. The ship has been advancing all this time. It is not the same hour as yesterday for them. The sun is lower over the sea.

The gangway. The deck where I put my foot. The shadow, the painted sheet-metal roof above, with the rivets showing. I perceive a spiral balustrade. But all the space between the place on which I have just set my foot and the spiral balustrade must be crossed. I cannot see the deck very well. I distinguish obstacles with difficulty. To right and left the limits are uncertain.

There are a number of thin cast iron columns. One of them is fixed into a sort of rectangular box against which a lifebuoy hangs. I guess that the ship's name is inscribed on the buoy. I know the name. But I do not want to guess. I want to read. I perceive the places of the letters, black markings, vague and wavering

I advance a few steps. To left and right I clearly see white walls, creamy white : and two brown doors on each side. I take four steps, or it may be five, and come up to the first column. The spiral balustrade is close now. It swings about a brighter void, in which it seems to me the details will transpire later. But to-day I have not the strength to go further.

This morning when I wake there is a terrible wind blowing. The whole of Marseilles quivers. Everything in the house seems to bang. Even with the windows shut, the curtains move.

It does not occur to me that the tempest here can extend to where the ship is. Yet I tremble with fear for them. When it was calm here, perhaps it was their turn to have the tempest. I did indeed think of it at times, but I did not tremble enough. At this moment the ship is moving through the night. The gusts, the creakings, the sudden squalls I hear, add themselves to that night there, and occupy that night which now surrounds me too.

Until the day ends the only courage I shall have will be to tremble for them, unable to convince myself that their safeguard is the unrelenting space that separates us.

It is night again. The lamp gleams upon the sideboard's carving.

The spiral balustrade. I am there. Have I the right to be there? Have I taken the requisite number of steps? Have I not assumed an ability to reach it, without really taking the trouble to cover the distance?

The illuminated cavity opens out beneath me. The light falls from a glass ceiling. The glass is coloured I think, or crossed by coloured bands. I know that the cavity is a main staircase leading below, and that it must also lead to the deck above. But chiefly I see it descend, and do not see it clearly enough. I should have no right to set my foot on stairs I cannot see, nor even to know where the first begins.

And yet my thoughts hurry me on. I cannot control my impatience. I know that Pierre's two cabins are below, I know their situation exactly and the way that must be taken to get there. I want to admit I am already there, and give myself permission to knock at the door, and open the door. But if I give way to that longing, everything I have done so far will be in vain. I should lose at one blow the *true* path I had succeeded in conquering step by step, from the gangway to the balustrade. I should have no more confidence in myself. I should tell myself it was all a pastime, and dismal at that. I should be abandoned by that strange hope which for four days now has possessed me, sustaining and consoling me from morn to night like a child being helped to cross a road. Heavens! it is no pastime that I seek. It would revolt me to have to confess to myself that I am indulging in the dismal pastime of imagining myself abandoned. Above all, it must not be that. I shall be patient. I touch the balustrade. I lean against it.

I can remain leaning against the rail. What time is it on board? Five-thirty perhaps. The light is already waning. From the glass cage a dim religious light falls into the cavity below.

Might it not chance that Pierre would pass by here? It is the time for tea. From four-thirty to five-thirty tea is served in the saloons. Pierre does not have to put in an appearance, and his work often keeps him below. But when he has been working in the afternoon, he likes to take a turn—smoking as he strolls—through the saloons in which the orchestra is playing, thinking of me perhaps in the soft dreaminess the

music evokes, of his own musician while the music flows round him.

Then what should prevent him as he strolls from passing by this spot. I have only not to move. The light which falls from its glass cage is still bright enough for him to recognize me, even from a distance.

Suddenly, I have to restrain myself not to burst into tears. There is a taste of ashes in my mouth ; or rather it is my whole being traversed by a gust of ashes.

My piano, my own piano, which I had abandoned for more than a year, when I left my mother, has just come. I wrote for it, as early as the day following my marriage, positive my mother would take longer to send it than we should take to reach Marseilles. Anyhow, here it is.

The tears which I have held back all these days break free. Why am I moved ? I feel my emotion is altogether out of proportion to any cause I can find for it. It overflows in every direction. It has more justification than I have tears.

I am standing facing my piano. I have wiped it a number of times. Bits of packing straw are still stuck in the hinges. It does not shine as I would like. Immediately it is touched, a little of the dust of travel begins to sift out of the joints in the wood.

It so happens that all my recent existence is evoked, raised up by this ghost. Sudden comparisons overwhelm me. My life with my mother, my months of solitude, my love, my new solitude, all want to come together in my breast, and they stifle me. But there is something else. As my eyes sink into and refresh themselves on the gleam of varnished wood, and massive graceful lines, I hear inside myself words like "Ark of the Covenant," "return of the Ark of the Covenant."

It is not anything precise I am saying to myself. But it seems to me that my piano comes to repair the friendship between myself and the powers from which I have separated : or rather was aiding its repair, because for days now I have felt indeed that it wanted to be repaired. It has come as an intercessor.

I seat myself. I open the piano. I lay my hands on the keys, and the music waiting only for a sign, which brooded there for me, gushes suddenly forth. It inundates me and I tremble. I know that trembling. Majestic chords surge forth. I hear, as in the past, bronze portals open. Upon my face showers the old inspiration, my ears are full of ancient murmurings. Beyond the portals, invisible happenings wait like a patient gathering of peoples.

My soul ! I long to repeat the words, my soul, as one tenderly names someone who has feared to lose you, who thought himself disdained, and who smiles again with a face yet more pale. Oh soul, what is there you cannot do ? Fanfares of the Last Judgment far off, light from the overhanging abyss, the end and recommencement, ruins out of which spring flames, primal decrees of a world eternal ! What is there you cannot do when you breathe again that wind from your own country ?

I waited till I was in bed. The room is quite dark save for a few gleams which glide on to the ceiling above the double curtains.

I shut my eyes. I have not thought out in advance what I shall do. I let myself be guided by myself. I want to try a strange thing which yet seems possible to me.

The narrow passage of the apartment runs parallel with my room. It is there, behind the closed door. I have the feeling that by wishing with all my might, I can, the instant after, be in that passage. Yet without moving from my place. Or, more clearly, without having demanded the simplest movement from my body, I shall be in person in the narrow passage. Yet one would have to admit my body had not left the bed. But I don't know. And it does not matter. The question of my body is no concern of mine. It is free to follow me if it likes. My presence in the passage will not exclude its own. It would even seem to me, when I looked, as if I glimpsed a form very similar to that which I have always had. But once more, I say, it is of no interest. What ought rather to be gone into, is how weight disappears. I picture the way in which I should stand in the corridor, turn

round in it, move about, but without the feeling of weighing on the earth when I meet the walls, or the door which ends them, or of striking against them in any manner which implies my having weight.

As for the action itself of going from my bed to this passage, I do not give it any particular thought. It is the will to attain one's object which seems to me to count most. And confidence. Of course, the rest does not follow of itself. My feeling is that one must bring about a sort of particularly painful detachment or tearing away. But the impulsion having been given, it is then not a question of progressing step by step from my bed to the door and opening the door. . . . No, once the impulsion is operative, I have only (I should have only) to direct it to the place I had decided to get to. How should I have opened the door? Or how would it have opened? I avoid asking myself. It is repugnant to me to think about the means to carry out my action, or about certain latent facilities by which it would profit. All my interest is monopolized by considerations of power and impulse. Where to collect sufficient energy and how employ it? With what gesture, most violent, yet also most adroit, bring about that detachment, that tearing away? Of whom demand what no one knows?

I ask myself have I truly decided to attempt that thing, and am I perhaps bringing it about? Everything is happening as if it was possible to forestall the act itself by another act, adumbrated or attenuated, and not exactly similar. After some minutes of an effort which I find familiar, for I have made it at times in dreams, I have a feeling of finding myself at one moment vaguely in the passage, and at the next of wandering in the corner opposite my bed, groping along the walls in a sort of slow immaterial floating.

I have just shut the book suddenly and as though against my wish. My hands remain resting on it. My heart beats violently. The note book seems swollen under my hand. Its contents assume a sort of material pressure which I restrain. All my ardour to know more turns into refusal to question further. I desire to come alone against the happenings that await me.

VIII

IN conformity with the Company's programme, this time our course was laid for the Eastern Mediterranean. But instead of following our most usual route, we went by way of Malta, with Egypt our first call. Our first stop therefore was Alexandria.

A certain number of passengers who had made the New York-Marseilles crossing remained with us. But we embarked a greater proportion of new passengers.

It was five o'clock, with night coming on when we passed in sight of the Château d'If. I happened to be on the upper deck. Someone opened a door. It was Bompard.

He shook hands with some reserve and scrutinized me. I looked my most amicable. I asked how things were with him, and whether he had had a good time in Marseilles. I arranged to meet him in the evening. He smiled, seemed surprised, and looked at me with indulgent curiosity. I think he must have been classifying my uncertain moods among the strange effects attributable to early days in marriage.

Our conversation that evening has left me with fewer reminiscences than the one I have reported earlier. It was very cordial and free, at least in seeming. Actually Bompard was somewhat suspicious. He kept watch over his words, and let me choose the subjects. As soon as we seemed moving into certain latitudes, his precautions redoubled.

I talked a good deal. I needed to. Not that I was trying to bemuse myself. As I see it the activity of my spirit had for its object an attempt to re-establish its one-time position. It multiplied its activity in the hope of finding again, half by chance, such or such a one that used to please it in the past.

What had happened to the suspicion which had assailed me some few hours earlier? It was still operative. But it had stopped developing. It had stuck at a certain level of probability without attempting to pass beyond it. It canvassed

no new arguments. As for me, I did nothing to destroy it. I was learning to tolerate it, to move around it without imparting to it any dangerous activity. When I thought of Lucienne, all' my thoughts, even the most amorous and most tender, addressed themselves to a being who, in addition to the qualities I had already acknowledged in her, appeared now as harbouring some secret, or at least some question. But, strangely enough, for the moment this particular problem in no way preoccupied me ; I was localizing it, shutting it up. So that the malaise it affected me with, itself remained limited, shedding no lustre.

I yearned for amity, for exchanges less poignant than those of love, for the flow of calm ideas as between men in front of a sea at times able to be the most reposeful idea of them all.

My nature, without formally asking my opinion, was beginning perhaps to want to repair the effects of the sentimental excesses to which for months it had been subjected. Bompard helped it as possibly did my suspicion.

Next day after lunch, as we were steaming along the coast of Sardinia, Bompard and I met again. I turned the conversation to my readings in biology of the preceding winter, and my resulting meditations. Bompard knew nothing of this side of the question. A certain laziness made him read nothing but the books which came his way. In any case, had he taken the trouble to go deeply into any subject, it would have been in a different direction. Biology reminded him too much of his studies and profession. He did not take his own functions seriously. And that feeling spread into everything. Bompard found justification for being a temperamental doctor by refusing to take seriously not only medicine but the sciences which underlie it.

Nevertheless he listened to me. He made a few half-hearted objections, whose inadequacy, however, came not from his lack of zeal for biology, but from the sketchiness of his mathematical training.

What astonished him was that I had spent so much time collecting the outlines of a contestable theory, the proof of

which was beyond me, and mostly that I should have been troubled by it. But he did not appear to notice that between my reveries of the preceding winter and those I had confided to him during our long nocturnal conversation, an enormous distance reigned. He did not ask how it was I had encompassed it, impelled or conveyed by what, nor where at that moment I stood. Did he fail to perceive it because he was thinking of something else, or because he was indifferent to ideas as such? I do not think so. He could not rely on my humour, that was all.

As we were talking, a man in the fifties, bareheaded, short, fairly corpulent, walked past, briefly saluting us.

"Do you know him?" asked Bompard.

"No. It is one of the passengers who came aboard yesterday."

"You must have had to do with him, even if it was only to find him a place at table?"

"Not specially. I don't remember it."

"Didn't the captain mention him to you?"

"No."

"You surprise me. They know each other well. I even thought he was having him at his own table."

"Who is it?"

"I met him once before about a year ago, returning from New York. He is a Pole. His name is . . . a name like Podomiecki. Is Podomiecki a Polish name?"

"Enough for me. I'll look him up on the list. He looks more like a German."

"I believe he comes from Galicia."

"Is he on his way back home?"

"I don't suppose he returns often. He's domiciled in America. He travels. He's rich."

"And is that all?"

"No, indeed. There is something quite special about him. He is well known in America, particularly in the Middle West. There is a story attached to him."

"Ah!"

"His childhood, in the first place. Or rather, his . . . revelation. A Chicago multi-millionaire told me about it

with great respect. Podomiecki—call him Podomiecki—was a child in a Galician village. The family very poor. There was a little mountain very near the village, and in the side of the mountain an abandoned quarry. I fear I may not tell the story very well. I shall certainly forget certain of the details. One day, a shepherd or peasant had lit a little brushwood fire among the rocks. No one took any notice, naturally. The sort of little fire that people are always making in the country. No wind. No crops, no woods, no dwelling near. Just a little spiral of calm smoke on the mountain side. All of a sudden the young Podomiecki—he may have been about eleven—who was inside the house with his family, and even, I seem to remember, in the middle of his mid-day meal, changes expression, shows great agitation, and trembling all over and in tears, says something of this kind to his parents : “ I implore you. Let us go away at once. And tell the neighbours to come away. Otherwise, we shall all die.” The parents must have had a certain amount of faith in their child, because he had always been so serious and wise. And no doubt his appearance, his voice, had something alarming in them. In short, they decide to leave the house, though all the time asking the child : “ But why do you say that ? ” “ The fire—— ” “ What fire ? ” “ Up there.” They see the tiny column of smoke. “ You are mocking us. You are not going to frighten us because someone is burning a handful of old weeds.” “ It is not the fire itself. But if you don’t believe what I say, we shall all die.” He was still trembling, and his eyes were wild. He was shouting. The neighbours had come out. The extraordinary emotion of the child, and probably also a certain inexplicable assurance in his announcement gripped them all, more or less. We must remember they were simple people, by no means the enemies of the miraculous, and not one ha’porth of critical spirit between them. Besides, what would it cost them to obey ? If nothing happened they would have got out of it with a good laugh at the alarm. So they go off, with the exception of the few most sceptical, in the direction indicated by the child ; as far as possible from the mountain. There was one man however who said : “ If the misfortune is to come from that fire up

there, I undertake to put it out." He then asked the child : " Child, shall I go up there ? " The infant made a gesture as if to say " I don't know. Yes, perhaps. Decide yourself." Then, while the majority went off with the child, and some insisted on remaining in the village, the man climbed up the mountain-side. The fire had gained somewhat, had wormed in among the undergrowth, had insinuated itself into the rocks. But there was nothing particularly alarming in that. The man begins extinguishing it, trampling it down, beating it out with branches of broom. He succeeds pretty quickly. But then he goes over his work with very great care. Since it is the fire which is in question for some mysterious reason, not the slightest trace of it must remain. He is finishing beating out the smoking twigs, when through a fissure between two rocks, he perceives it leads into a cavity which, encumbered with undergrowth too, is also just beginning to burn. He has never noticed that cavity before. He notices it now because he is in a state of tension. It seems very deep. He feels he would like to descend into it. He makes sure for the second time that the fire is completely extinguished, for fear the undergrowth in the cavern might catch, for he does not want to be smoked to death like a fox. So he slides down. The cavity is enormous. It is an underground chamber, of natural origin, which may have been modified by human hands at some time or other. In the shadow, he makes out certain shapes against the wall. With great care, he begins to feel them over. He thinks he can distinguish small barrels up-ended. When he taps them, they sound full, not of liquid, but of sand. There may have been twenty of them side by side. After much groping he finds one, the top of which is broken. He thrusts his hand in and feels he is indeed holding a sort of very fine sand, takes out a handful, and makes his way out. In the hollow of his hand is a black dust, which looks and smells like gunpowder. At which the man makes sure yet once more that the fire is quite dead everywhere, and for greater safety urinates on the carbonised twigs closest to the grotto, and hurries down into the village holding his handful of powder. As a certain time had elapsed and no more smoke was seen rising from the mountain side, the villagers had

returned. They were already laughing at their fear; joking, teasing the child, who was calm now but still pale and silent. The man drops into the middle of all this crowd, waving his shut hand from which the powder is oozing from between his fingers. He had no breath left, he could not utter a word. He pours his handful on a stone, makes gestures for a match, brings it near the powder which flares up suddenly, singeing his eyebrows. You guess the rest. The twenty barrels were full of blasting powder. They had been there nobody knew how long, probably from the time the quarry was abandoned. The cavern had been used in those days as the magazine for explosives. It was one of those old, perfectly stable powders, which keep indefinitely in the absence of damp. And the grotto must have been chosen on account of its dryness. No one in the village had ever even heard it spoken of. The last people to exploit the quarry, strangers to the place, gone no one knew why, as a result of reverses perhaps, had not informed anyone of the existence of these barrels nor even taken the trouble to come and claim them. Besides it was not without difficulty that the normal entrance to the tunnel was discovered, a tiny door in the rock which a later fall of earth had blocked.

"There you have the beginnings of the gentleman you have just seen pass."

"But . . . do you consider that a true story, or a clever invention?"

"It seems nothing could be truer. The destiny of Mr.—say Podomiecki—began in that incident. The village, of course, looked on him as its saviour. One hour later and the fire, following the undergrowth, would have reached the barrels. The whole mountain would have blown up and fallen in fragments on the village. Certainly, in that part of the world, the miraculous nature of the happening, and of the child himself, was not called in question by anybody."

"But how did he get to America?"

"I can't remember."

"And what did he do there?"

"In the Middle West and elsewhere he is considered as being gifted with supernatural powers. You see the sort of

service one might ask of him. I've heard a lot about it, and with examples too. But I can't remember much about it all. He made a fortune out of it."

"But listen, doesn't it occur to you that perhaps the career he carved out in America may be a perfectly simple explanation for the other: the abandoned quarry that someone had carved out somewhere in Poland? I can very well picture some charlatan settling down in the Middle West and attributing this incontestable story to himself in order to strike the imaginations round him. It is the usual sort of vociferous publicity that nothing can wear out and which is so very American."

"Very likely. But it does not fit in with what is said about him, nor even with his ways. In America he will on no account exhibit himself, he seeks no kind of publicity, and even lives most retiringly. He numbers quite important people among his friends—I had the proof on this very boat—politicians, company directors, university professors. You may tell me that they are not necessarily all endowed with the keenest perceptions. But at least, they know well enough what a charlatan is, they meet heaps of them. And they are not the easiest people in the world to hobnob with."

"And his money?"

"That made itself almost without him. It is pretty obvious that any millionaire who took such a man seriously, and came to see him to ask a service so very unusual, and then, believing, rightly or wrongly, that the service had been rendered, would consider it a special favour to have his cheque for ten thousand dollars accepted by the other."

I looked at Bompard. It was he who astonished me this time. I said:

"Have you already had some talk with your Pole?"

"Yes, when we crossed together a year ago."

"What sort of impression did he make on you?"

"A good one."

"Ah! He must have told you about his miracles."

"Not a word."

"Well, then, of his powers; of the gifts he claims."

"No. He seemed to me very reserved. He asked me a

number of questions. As to the emigrants for example, and the arrangements for feeding them. In a simple, human manner. He reminded me rather of an American Archbishop we once had as a passenger. He too, never mentioned religion."

"All right. He knows how to behave. But that does not prevent him being an impostor."

Bompard did not reply.

I felt somewhat aggressive. I gazed out upon the classic sea which gleamed before us, that sea which has always looked so haughtily down on mere reason. I saw New York again. I said to myself, "Such gross magic fits in well with skyscrapers. It is not astonishing that, faced with Manhattan, even reason begins to doubt."

That evening in the dining saloon, I looked round for the Pole. I had during the afternoon checked his name against my lists. Bompard had slightly distorted it. And now, in spite of my efforts, it is altogether impossible for me to get the exact name again. Podomiecki is what keeps on coming back. It hardly matters.

Podomiecki, then, was not sitting at any of the "official" tables. He was sitting two tables beyond Bompard, in a corner. Had my second placed him there by chance? Or had he himself chosen that corner?

His table-companions were two gentlemen who appeared to me to be English. They must have been strangers to him. The passing of bread, the pickles, gave occasion for various ceremonious gestures from one to the other, but the conversation was intermittent.

One of the two Englishmen had come into dinner in his travelling clothes. Podomiecki and the other were in dinner suits. In that get up the individuality of the Pole was less pronounced. Should I have ended by noticing him, had I not heard him spoken of? I cannot be sure.

Physically he was squat and bulging like many Germans. But in that type of German the hair is usually blond, colourless even, and the face, pink and flabby. Podomiecki was dark.

His features expressed vigour, and he wore a thick stubby moustache. His eyes, rather large and prominent, changed expression very noticeably according to whether he was talking to his neighbours or withdrawing from them. In the former case his expression contributed largely towards that air of reserve and episcopal courtesy which Bompard had mentioned, and which his rugged features in no way helped. But when Podomiecki fell back on his thoughts, or into an attitude that was less purely social, a sort of sensitiveness or anxiety would come into his eyes which much surprised me and seemed very fine. But there too, had I not been influenced by Bompard's remarks?

During dinner Podomiecki exchanged slight friendly salutations with the captain and Bompard himself. He looked in my direction once or twice, but unless he was taking advantage of moments in which I could not see him, he seemed not to be at all interested in me, nor aware of my curiosity.

The following day shortly before dinner, the captain, whom I happened to meet, said to me :

"Will you come to my cabin, this evening? I shall have someone there who is rather interesting. You will see : an American Pole. It will be just a small gathering. Not too early, eh, because of the watch. About eleven, say."

My first thought was that Bompard must have been responsible for bringing about this meeting. "He is trying a new experiment," I thought, remembering the New York tea-party. I caught him at the entrance to the dining saloon, and said :

"I'm seeing you later at the captain's."

"The captain?"

His surprise seemed sincere. Besides, some minutes later I saw the captain approach him and apparently extend the same invitation, adding a slight nod to me as a reminder.

As we rose from the table, I said to Bompard : "Didn't you know about it?"

"No. Not a thing."

"You must have been talking to your Pole since yesterday."

"I haven't seen him again."

"Do you know the reason for the gathering?"

"No idea! I imagine the old man merely wants to have a drink in company."

Whereupon we parted.

About ten I got rid of the people who had dragged me to the bar, to spend an hour in peace with myself. I strolled off towards the stern of the boat. I knew there were certain parts there which were generally deserted, being difficult of access and nearly always wind-swept, like the apses of certain churches. I felt in a state which was among those I am most accustomed to, calm, tired rather, indifferent to most things, lacking spring, desiring nothing, extremely lucid.

On deck, the weather was soft and autumnal, though fresh. Visibility was poor. Clouds passed overhead which in the north would fall in rain on Lombardy, in snow on the Grisons and the Bernese Oberland.

Had I not known our position, I should have found it difficult to guess what part of the world I was in. This wind out of Cyrenaica might have been a breeze off the Bermudas, even a Breton breeze. The sea was somewhat choppy. The swell was relatively very long.

I felt no tedium. I could very well have stayed where I was till dawn. I thought sympathetically of lighthouse keepers, of sentinels, of all the conditions of existence only to be endured when lives have been purged of their impatience.

As the hour drew nearer I moved away, but without hurrying. I heard the lapping of the waves and the heavy rumble of the boat. On the way I stopped and leaned over the rail.

I was looking vaguely at the sea when an infinitesimal shock went through me. Slight as it was, it made me desire, or at least it coincided with the desire to change my posture. I turned about, resting my hips against the rail and crossing my arms. In front of me I had the deck, rather dark, and an angle of shadow. I became aware then of a most singular feeling, which had, in the last moment, sought to attract my attention.

It resembled nothing I had so far felt. It was impossible to confound it with any other feeling, or once having experienced it ever forget it. I was very calm, and I summoned all the

discernment I could muster to take hold of it. I told myself : " It is most important for me to find out exactly what it is." But I lacked even the vaguest analogies to help me do so.

On the other hand, I was practically certain that this was not one of those impulses which at times well up in us, capable of suddenly changing one's temperament, the colour of one's thoughts, but which one knows very well have their origin in ourselves.

What I was experiencing on the contrary, though it was not frankly external to myself, did not seem to issue out of me or result from me. Illusory or not, it was something which to some extent felt real.

Something also which spontaneously monopolised the attention. A flash of ill-humour, a wave or shadow of unaccustomed sensitivity are sensed by us, and at times with a certain degree of pleasure. But really to concentrate on them, go into them, a certain discipline is needed. The average man in good mental health doesn't bother. Everything that is of the order of emotion, of interior trouble, tends to make itself felt, to make itself obeyed, but not to make itself perceptible when dispassionately viewed. Or so at least it seems to me. When, nevertheless, one does concentrate on them, one's interest begins to wear the sickly expression of a dissociated or regressive conscience, and personally, I notice it at once.

In my place, the simplest sort of man might possibly have set himself fewer questions than I did, and been less irritated than I by his impotence to define what he was going through. But I do not think he could have done otherwise than give it all his attention.

In any case, I was certainly startled and even troubled. But, if I may so put it, on the rebound. The thing had not begun by being an emotion, nor a trouble. And if it stirred and disquieted me, it was chiefly on reflection. Originally, paradoxical as it may sound, I had felt it as something natural almost.

Put otherwise, as an event noted, it seemed new in my life, though in essence not fundamentally divergent from it. In some remote corner of my brain it would link up with certain indefinable instinctive ideas. It would hardly be exaggerating

to say that what helped me to become aware of it was just that recognition. For my astonishment was mingled with mental gestures such as "Of course!" "Well, well."

How long, in all, did it last? Hardly any time, I think. When it was over, I felt none of that slight distress, that sort of inverted dizziness which characterises the moment in which one comes to oneself, when one has happened to abandon oneself to some interior swirl. I said to myself, "It's over," as I might have said "The pitching is stopping" or "The smell of burning has gone."

Then I brusquely made up my mind not to bother. I shook myself, lit a cigar, and quickly made my way to the captain's suite.

I was thinking now of the gathering to which I was going, of the personage who was the occasion of it, and who, during my solitary stroll, had altogether vanished from my mind. "How many shall be we? I only hope the old man hasn't invited the chief engineer, a tormenting aggravating brute. . . . What will the Pole tell us? . . . They may perhaps ask him to do things with cards, or read our hands. All things considered I might have been interested in seeing him alone. But this 'small gathering' ruins everything."

The captain's suite was a little forward and in the centre of the upper deck, near a staircase that led up to the bridge. This part of the ship was not very familiar to me. Since I had been aboard his ship, the captain had asked me in two or three times with some other colleagues, but never ceremoniously, and I had always been received in his bedroom.

I found the door. When I knocked there was no answer. But I heard voices coming from somewhere else. In front of me there were a number of steps, a little landing, and a huge hanging of red velvet intensely lit up by the lights in the ceiling.

I went up the steps. I recognized the captain's voice. This then must be his sitting-room, where I had never been. I touched the hanging which sagged back into an empty recess. I was puzzled how to announce myself. After some hesitation, I had at last to push aside the velvet curtain, and

appear in the room more suddenly than I should have liked.

From the interior eyes turned towards me. The voices fell silent. At that moment the ship gave a sideways roll, and there was a loud noise of waves. I held on by the curtain, then drew it behind me.

I saw, in addition to the captain, Podomiecki, Bompard, and my second, a retiring, intelligent and charming fellow. The intimacy of the gathering I found not ungratifying.

I was introduced to Podomiecki. I noticed he was no longer in dinner clothes. He had changed since the meal. Whether he had done so to be more comfortable, or through some subtle discernment of what was appropriate, the change was to his advantage. He had, in doing so, left behind nearly all traces of the commonplace.

At first our remarks were confined to the usual politenesses. Podomiecki was dignified, watchful. He would search a little, then launch out rather volubly, rushing certain syllables in a way more Slav than American. It seemed to me at first as if he knew French well. But once we had got past the usual conventional phrases his flow diminished. Certain words would only come with difficulty, and he would not accept what first occurred to him. At times he would turn to the captain for help, uttering a word in English, but pronouncing it so strangely that the captain himself, who understood English much better than I did, had difficulty in recognizing it, and instead of rendering it, would mumble a "Yes, you get the meaning, do you not, Monsieur Febvre?"

All in all then, Podomiecki belonged obviously to that category of men who always attach importance to their words, and for whom the expression of their thoughts represents a perpetual effort. This prejudiced me in his favour.

"You know," said the captain to me, "Mr. Podomiecki asked to make your acquaintance?"

"I feel most flattered."

Podomiecki bowed to me, his eyes half closed.

I went on:

"I hope you are comfortable on board, sir? Do you find your cabin satisfactory?"

"Oh, most."

"Perhaps you are not altogether satisfied with your seat in the dining saloon? I really can't say how that came about. But it can be dealt with."

He smiled.

"Oh, Mr. Purser, it was not to get myself a better seat that I wanted to make your acquaintance."

"I have already made two crossings with Monsieur on board," said the captain. "He is a great observer of men. Certain heads interest him very much. That is true of all of us to some extent. But with us it is always more or less a matter of chance. Whereas with Mr. Podomiecki there is always a reason for it."

"And then," I said to Podomiecki, "we already have a common acquaintance." I indicated Bompard. "The doctor may have done me the kindness to mention me to you."

Podomiecki took a moment to understand. Then: "No, I have not had that pleasure. We have only exchanged greetings."

"You surely don't imagine," flung Bompard at me under his voice rapidly, "that I pass my time talking about you."

Podomiecki, who was sitting on the divan, turned altogether towards me, one of his short legs crossed over the other, the knee held by a hand. His large eyes, which were fixed upon me, moved vivaciously. His round face wore a new, much more open and almost infantile expression, while manifesting at the same time the signs of some interior travail. We waited.

"You are much to be envied," he said to me at last.

He fell silent a moment, squeezing his knee, his eyes raised to the ceiling. Then: "Had you any idea of it? Perhaps not."

He murmured dreamily: "There is no one on this boat at this moment, as interesting to me . . . as you."

It was said in such a voice that we all began to laugh. He laughed too. His face took on an expression of slyness. "You are wondering to yourself 'Is this man a vendor of oracles?' You don't much care for oracles. And I don't much care about selling them," he laughed, his body shaking "or giving them away either. Isn't that so, captain, you can vouch you have never seen me . . ." and he added two or three words in English, perhaps some familiar Americanism

which neither the captain nor Bompard seemed to understand any more clearly than myself. But a general laugh, started by Podomiecki, disposed of the matter.

"It's clear, my dear Febvre," said the captain, "that you are a child of fortune, and bear the marks so distinctly that this gentleman, whose province it is, picked you out at the first glance from the whole population of a mail boat. So there! It's as simple as you like. Fortune is dangling at your coat-tails. Have you perhaps bought a ticket in the Spanish lottery?"

"I am not certain," I replied, "that that is quite what M. Podomiecki meant."

"No, not quite," said the Pole.

He looked attentively at me.

"How do you say in French, 'unbelieving, incredulous'?"

"You say both. It depends on the sense."

He thought a moment.

"Neither one nor the other then. 'Terrestrial' rather. You are someone who is absolutely 'terrestrial.'"

He burst out laughing.

"You libel him," said Bompard. "There was a time when he was most 'terrestrial.' But since——"

"You are not attacking the seafaring qualities of my chief purser, I hope," said the captain jovially.

"No, no."

Podomiecki continued, looking at the ground: "I don't know if you've been told anything about me. You mustn't get an exaggerated idea of my powers. The things that come to my knowledge are few, and then nearly always obscure. A great many people in my opinion have been much more gifted in such matters than myself. But what little I say has its basis in reality. I add nothing. Thus I do not exactly know what it is that is happening for you. But something is at this moment happening for you that is not happening for any of the thousand other people on this boat. That, I feel. And I feel too that you pursue your path blindly. Answer. Are you aware that something extraordinary is happening for you?"

I do not remember my reply. But I was beginning to feel

embarrassed and so I must have given it an evasive and discouraging turn.

"Listen," he said. "You bring to my mind a Galician story. A young and very beautiful girl, engaged to a young man, happened to die. Or rather, seemed to be dead. She was put in a coffin. And the coffin was put into the mausoleum, which was like a little house. But then the young woman begins to come out of her trance and comes to life. She finds herself in this box. In the meantime, the fiancé had returned to the cemetery, full of his love and sorrow. He sits down in front of the little door of the tomb. He thinks of his dead sweetheart. He thinks only of her (Podomiecki emphasized these last words strongly). The young woman was so vigorous physically and her will was so strong, that by turning over, and bracing herself with her hands, and pushing with every ounce of her strength, she managed to raise the lid of the coffin with her back. And then to draw herself out. But she was still in the deep cave. And the masons had carefully sealed it up. So from below, she struck the stone with her fists: with the wood. Perhaps she shouted also. The young man sitting in front of the little door did hear something. But (Podomiecki again emphasized his words strongly) he did not believe he could have heard. And after weeping a little longer he went away."

The Pole had ended on a note of extreme energy and conviction. He remained strongly affected. He wiped his forehead. A great anxiety seized hold of me. The frightful danger and agony conjured up by the story effaced all its details, and simplified its meaning. I did not need even a second to picture Lucienne in danger of death, and myself in complete ignorance of it, absurdly tranquil on this boat, with the sea's immensity between us. I was indeed lucid enough to tell myself that my anguish stimulated by such facile means was due merely to an imaginative impulse which my reason disavowed. But the young man in front of the little door had also thought something very reasonable. The Pole seemed to have anticipated my defence, and to have confuted it.

Besides, our three companions seemed themselves painfully affected.

"Well," said the captain, "when you go out of your way to be gloomy——!"

Podomiecki, his calmness restored, looked more from one to the other than particularly at me.

"No," he said. "Don't make any mistake. That is not it at all."

He meditated; then added:

"Don't think at all of what took place in the cavern, and that the young man ought to have heard. It has nothing to do with you. Think only of this: that an idea he had was enough to prevent him hearing."

Bompard and the captain, seeing that I was uncomfortable, turned the conversation into other channels. Podomiecki followed suit immediately. Without the least sign of constraint, he was able to change his expression, his voice, and reanimate his laughter. He related some highly amusing negro stories, and also a number of Jewish stories which I came across, years later, in collections of such things.

We split up about two in the morning. Bompard accompanied the captain who was returning to the bridge. Before going below, I took a turn round the deck.

As I came back to the main staircase, I chanced on Podomiecki, just as I was opening the door. He must have been waiting for me.

"You see, Mister Purser, the difficulty for me is always how to suggest. All I wanted to say to you was just this: you follow your path, and you do so without paying attention. That is all. Because that is all I know. Yes. There is also this: the thing you . . . are missing, I mean, passing quite close to without realizing it. There. Oh, as far as that goes, you are like the multitude who go their way blindly because of the ideas in their heads. But you, what you are missing is something very fine, I know it; a great tribute, something as admirable, as affecting as the sweetheart who burst her coffin with her back. I know it, because it has made my heart beat, and affected me, myself. And not one man in many millions is granted such a thing, even once in a lifetime. That you must believe."

IX

THE next morning we had a breakdown in the engine-room. The second engineer, whom I questioned about it, assured me it was not grave, and that by reducing our speed a few knots, we should avoid all complications. But the chief engineer persuaded the captain that everything would blow up if we did not slow down to the speed of a barge.

The effect on me was one of keen disappointment. Our arrival in Alexandria would be delayed possibly twenty-four hours, as would therefore such news of Lucienne as I might find there.

In the evening, dinner being over, my ill-humour contributing, I decided to disappear before the withdrawal to the bar and smoking-room, and work. I told no one, with such success that I was sure the pesterers would look everywhere but in my room for me.

I put in two good hours checking documents. Then I laid them aside, threw myself back in my armchair, and smoking, gave myself up to a tranquil melancholy. I was placed in such a manner that I could see the door of my office which connected my two rooms. The separating curtain was pushed aside. I could see part of the second cabin, in particular the wash-basin with its two gleaming taps. The lamps in that room were lit too. All was silent but admirably visible.

In myself there was that semi-depression of the nerves which increases lucidity: but which, unfortunately, suppresses all desire, and even all hope of sleeping.

"If this goes on," I told myself, "I shan't sleep a wink all night. I shall finish my cigar. Then I shall do a little mathematics. I shall amuse myself by trying to work out the problem we touched on this morning (concerning the breakdown in the engine-room. The second engineer had told me exactly what had happened, what parts exactly had been

affected and to what degree. Certain critical factors had thereby been affected which he had been content to estimate roughly, but which could be worked out).

At the end of some minutes I became aware that the feeling which had come over me the night before, was about to repeat itself. I recognized it without any possible doubt. It must have begun rather suddenly, but the slight initial shock was absent or had passed unnoticed.

The time was almost the same as the night before. On this occasion I did not waste time putting questions to myself. All I did was to stay attentive while permitting my attention to remain as unhampered as I could.

A sort of natural evolution then took place in the feeling. It became more absorbing and more stable. A definite effort would now have been needed to refuse to acknowledge its exterior origin. Of itself it was becoming part of reality. Yet I could not place it. I felt it, somehow, as though the immediate surroundings had received a charge of electricity, as if the air had become heavier in patches, with regions of greater destiny, though fluctuating.

Yet everything, nevertheless, remained as distinct. The light seemed nowhere affected. I continued to see, as before, the door of my office, the corners of the room, the little empty recess, and in the distance the two metal taps mirrored in the porcelain of the wash-basin. My eyes at no moment saw any veil or shadow. But I had, if it can be said, the non-visual feeling of some interposition between the objects and myself, an interposition which was neither constant nor uniform, and which changed its position. But I do not think I could have kept track of those movements, nor indicate them in any way. I had a total, not divided, apprehension of what was happening, while such differences as I divined therein had no origin in space, nor possibly in time. At the most favourable moments the impression I felt hardly attained even such a degree of precision as "There has taken place, in the time that has just elapsed, an indefinable interposition between the corner of the room and myself, between those two taps and myself, and it seems to me *now* that it did not occur in both places at once, but progressively."

I add that without interfering with my attentiveness, without in any way troubling my state of scrupulous docility, on the contrary exciting it possibly, a suppressed but intense emotion of almost tragic quality took hold of me. I felt my heart throbbing as though I were lying on it. My throat became parched. I forgot to breathe.

Next evening we were very near land. We could, by speeding up a little, have entered Alexandria that same day. But the captain who stood in awe of specialists, had not wished to upset the chief engineer. He had decided to proceed dead slow all night so as not to come into port until morning.

To make still more sure that no one would come and disturb me in my cabin, I adopted tactics different from those of the preceding night. After dinner, I showed myself in the smoke-room and the saloons. By this means I ran into the three or four colleagues with whom I was most friendly. I told them I was off colour. They tried to amuse me. I let myself be drawn into a game of chess with my second. . . . For spectators we had Bompard and some passengers. But while I played, I could think only of the cabin in which I should soon find myself. My state of mind was that of a man who, in the midst of a gay crowd, waits for the moment of some secret passionate rendezvous. The presentiment of what he is about to experience lends a glittering quality to every moment he passes thus in public. He is more intoxicated than impatient. Merely the light that streams from him ought to suffice to betray him. But his desire makes everything easy to him, even pretence. I therefore pretended, convincingly, to have a headache, or touch of influenza.

I had promised myself to retire at a quarter to eleven. But after the half-hour, I could hold out no longer.

"I don't feel really at all well," I declared, "I shall go to bed."

I dropped the game within a move or two of the end. I said to my second, so as to be heard by the others: "If anything at all turns up, you take charge. Give the order I'm not to be disturbed. I absolutely must have a good night."

Once in my cabin, I shot the bolt. I sat down in my arm-chair, gave myself up to calmness, trying in every way to re-establish exactly the conditions of the preceding night. But with this difference, that for the first time I expected something to happen. But ought I to consider the fact of waiting as in itself unfavourable?

However, I tried as far as possible to purify it of all content. I forbade myself to imagine anything. It was difficult not to think of anything, but I succeeded in almost contenting myself with those insignificant thoughts which do not lead to other thoughts, and leave no wake behind.

Suddenly, I hear someone walking in the corridor, stop, and knock at my door. I do not reply. The knock comes again. Then: "It's me."

I recognize Bompard's voice. I hurriedly take off my waistcoat, my collar, and throw them into the other room, on the bunk. Then I open the door slightly.

"Good evening," he says. "I came to see how you were feeling."

"As you see, I am just going to bed . . . I have taken some aspirin."

"Then you don't feel any worse? Well, anyhow, don't forget I'm a doctor, however little of one I may be. No shivering? No temperature? Your aspirin . . . would you like me to go and get you something more serious?"

"No, old man, thanks. It was kind of you to put yourself out. A good night's sleep and I shall be up and about tomorrow."

He was scrutinizing me, asking himself why I did not invite him in. I opened the door a little wider and stood away a little. "Perhaps he thinks I'm in someone's good graces." This suspicion, which I ought to have laughed at, I should have found very disagreeable really. Bompard advanced a step. Without being able to see all the nooks in my two cabins, he could see from the lay of the land that I was alone. "I would ask you to stay a bit," I said, "but you would find it rather dull. And then really I can hardly stand."

I pushed him out.

It needed ten good minutes to dissipate the almost material influences left by this visit. In a number of ways it had troubled an atmosphere I would have liked very carefully to protect. It had even sprayed into it some indefinable trace of the comic.

Then I reflected that it had made me lose time, that the return of what I awaited was possibly subject to the narrowest limits and that, owing to an intruder's fault, I had missed it.

"Missed." "What are you missing?" I heard those words again. I confessed to myself that I found them poignant. Pass close to something. Be within an inch of something. Miss it. Even without knowing what one is missing, one can get a very good idea of the essential tragedy of the situation in which one finds oneself. One wants to hold out, spread wide, fully prepared, the two palms of the hands, to shut them suddenly should anything at all brush against them, in order to capture it. Or suddenly, the thought of an obstacle is what takes on an immense subtle significance. No longer does one think of a rock. It is no longer a question of how to get round the obstacle. The obstacle is something which spreads out before you, very close, and cannot be encountered however you may turn or stretch your hands : something which is always in front of you, expanding vertically in every direction, to infinity. And the palms of the hands, these two palms, stretched forth and widely spread, glide over it and do not realize there is an obstacle, as though the world were made in that way, as though it were natural for the hands to glide thus, unable to make any real advance in the direction of what is being missed, though it is so close to you, on the other side.

Two days later, while the boat was steaming along the coast of Asia, I stayed up reading past midnight in my office.

At a certain moment I stopped reading. I placed the book on the table, marking the page. I found myself in a position to which I was accustomed (and which, clearly, was due more to the objects and the place, than to any preference of mine) lying back somewhat in my armchair, facing both the door

which gave on the corridor, and the little recess which connected my two rooms. I was rather distraught, vaguely occupied with the ideas in my book, the subject of which but little interested me, and looking at the well-known objects in front of me with a sort of sympathetic attention.

Suddenly I had the impression, not that the outer door of my cabin was opening, but that, in the period of time which had elapsed and the duration of which I did not attempt to gauge, it had opened and then shut.

Then as I gazed at the corner of the room nearest the door, I perceived, midway between that corner and myself, a form standing, arrested in its motion, but not altogether immobile. Then the form moved forward more frankly as if to gain the empty recess. As it moved through the dividing space, it took on more solidity and sharper outline. As far as I can tell, at that moment it had about the degree of distinctness of a reflection in a slightly faulty and dulled window, giving a semi-obscure background.

The form was of human size and its feminine characteristics could already be recognized.

It changed its position very slowly, with pauses followed by short sudden movements forward. It behaved, if you prefer, in the manner of a visitor trying to find its way in some unaccustomed place, but its groping was much more accentuated, its hesitation seemingly longer and more anxious, as if for it, the unaccustomedness of the place was augmented by the defective lighting.

I had not at first noticed to what degree the form hid the objects in front of which it passed. But suddenly I could no longer see the glitter of the nickel taps. The form had reached the empty recess and was profiled against it. Then it entered the other room, walked to the wash-basin and seemed to lean over it. It turned its back to me. I saw the arms, little by little, make a movement as if the hands were groping to find the two taps which had become invisible to me.

Then the form seemed to withdraw to the right. The taps glittered again. If the form was still there, the partition now hid it from me.

Was it still there? I did not feel agitated. I was not

afraid. I showed none of the material signs of emotion. But it took me a certain time to know whether I should get out of my armchair. I was afraid perhaps that the form might have completely disappeared, and I found a strange sweetness in thinking it still there, in the hidden part of my bedroom, in thinking that and being uncertain of it. It was also a way of allowing her full liberty to disappear, a means of passing from presence to absence with modesty and in secret.

Yet I ended by getting up. Very slowly I moved myself forward, hesitating almost to look in front of me. I went through the recess.

I saw Lucienne sitting on my bunk, her lovely face turned towards me, her features drawn a little, her eyes wider and more shining than usual, tired, feverish possibly, but smiling, like someone who has made a great effort and has been rewarded.

Thus she stayed within three paces of me. Nothing now was vague in her appearance. Sitting sideways on the bunk, touching the floor with a foot, clad in a dress I recognized, with her head bare, and only her hair arranged somehow differently, she could be felt weighing upon the thickness of the bedding, pressing upon the floor with her foot, and occupying a position in space with all the plenitude of a living body.

I realized also that this presence owed nothing to my spirit, that it was not at all of the nature of a dream or thought, that no more than I had raised it up was I free to suppress or modify it by any mental effort, or a more or less direct modification of the condition, perfectly normal by the way, in which I found myself.

I could, as for any other object, stop seeing it by shutting my eyes. I could, it might be, still attempt some clumsy act which would trouble it, cause it to withdraw or vanish. But its dependence in respect to myself stopped there.

Something that was hardly less surprising than that presence in the usual lighting and commonplace background of my cabin was the calmness, not of heart, but of spirit which I retained. I was extremely moved. It was probably the greatest emotional experience I had ever passed through. But I reacted

as though faced by some natural event. To the tumult which filled my breast there did not enter for the moment any of those pressing, imperious questions which should, it seems to me, have assailed me. I said to myself: "Yes, that is Lucienne. Lucienne is with me. Herself, two paces away, in my cabin. In this ship steaming along the shores of Asia. We are not separated any more. Our absence has suddenly ended. So nothing has been able to prevent our being together. She is looking at me. I am certain she can see me as I can see her. I am certain she knows she is here. We are both here, alone together. The ship follows its route. Where it is, where it is going, does not matter. We are looking at each other. We are smiling at each other. We are together. Lucienne and I. Even if the ship were at this moment at the world's end, we should be together. Even if some other ship had torn me from the planet, carrying me at this moment through a different space, we should be together. She would smile at me like this. She would see me smiling at her."

I was tempted to advance a little farther, to throw myself at her knees, to seize her in my arms, at least cover with kisses the hands she had let fall, one into a fold of her dress, the other upon the coverlet of my bunk.

Perhaps she read it in my eyes. I saw in hers what seemed a demand to take care not to move. Her presence was so precious to me that I almost held back my breath. What dominated me was the fear of injuring a miracle, which I had in no wise created, which I could never of myself find again, and which I was contemplating, fragilely suspended in a moment of my life.

Even the sweetness, the relief of calling her by name "Lucienne," of saying simply "You," I had the strength to resist. I contented myself by repeating deep within myself "You, it's you, be at rest, I know you are here. I see you clearly. This time you have not come in vain. I am not missing you."

Suddenly, I saw her lower her head. I had an impression as if she breathed out a sigh of profound fatigue. Then she half rose from the bunk, looked at me again, and put out a hand. Her gesture seemed to say "Leave me. Stand aside.

I must go." At that moment a slight mist appeared to glide, not between her and me, but between the outlines of her body and the objects in its immediate neighbourhood ; as if this mist were softly detaching her from these other objects, etherealizing her, outlining her with a sort of vague luminosity.

With a movement which I sensed was dictated by her, I turned away my eyes. Then I retreated backwards as far as I could, and stopped with my back against the partition.

The recess was about one pace distant from my right.

Without looking in her direction, I caught a glimpse of Lucienne's form, softened and attenuated already, moving slowly towards the recess and passing quite close to me. No more than when she had come in did I get the impression that she looked at me in passing. She seemed entirely taken up by the effort to find her way.

I waited, it may have been for five minutes, with my back against the partition. And while I did so, I made sure that nothing in my perception of the things about me or in the way my spirit responded, revealed the least divergence from my normal state. Then I went into my office. It could not have looked more usual. My book was waiting on the table.

I pressed a bell-push. I wanted to see someone as soon as possible ; hear myself talk to someone. A steward came and knocked at the door.

"Are there any people upstairs ?" I asked.

"Yes, certainly. The dance stopped about a quarter of an hour ago. But there are still people in the bar and the smoking-room."

While the steward stood in front of me and we were speaking, I was concentrating on the feel of what was taking place at that moment between us. That could not be doubted. I was listening to a diapason of reality. But this man conveyed to me in too slight a degree something I needed to feel immediately, something I wanted to receive full in the face then and there, even if only as a state of silent communion, so that I might see what my reaction was. I needed someone

like myself in front of me, but a similar capable of introducing a certain critical intensity, reason.

I thought of Bompard. Bompard would not do. I would not bring Bompard into this, even from a distance.

I said to the steward : " Can you tell me whether my second is in bed ? "

" Not for long in any case. I saw him come downstairs not ten minutes ago."

" Go and see. If he is not in bed, ask him to come here. But only if he is not in bed. No point in his getting up."

To fill in my wait I walked up and down a few times. I wondered vaguely what professional excuse I could make for disturbing him. Two or three times I went towards the empty recess. Then I went through. My eyes turned to the bunk. In the very place where Lucienne had sat, in the bedding, was the imprint of a body. The coverlet distinctly sank in and was creased a little. Even the turnover of the sheet was rumpled. I felt my heart beat with perhaps more violence even than when Lucienne had been present.

There was a knock at the door. It was my second. As I moved to let him in, an idea struck me.

" Excuse me," I said, " I do hope you haven't got out of bed. It would be a pity because what I wanted to see you about wasn't really worth it. Do you lock your door in the evening after dinner ? "

" Not always."

" Have you ever noticed anything ? "

" Anything suspicious . . . ? No."

" Come here."

I made him come into the other cabin with me. I showed him the imprint on my bed.

" What would you say that was ? "

" That hollow. Why, that someone had sat down there."

" Good. And as I am certain I have not sat on it since the coverlet was drawn, what am I to think ? "

" That it must have been someone else."

I led him back to my office. I had kept my voice detached, almost jocular.

" Of course, in itself, it is of no particular importance,

but these last evenings, I have observed two or three other indications——”

“And do you lock your door?”

“That’s just it. It makes me wonder whether we may not have some lascar in the crew who has got hold of some false keys. . . . Well, once more, I must apologize——”

“Oh, it’s nothing, you were quite right. I’ll keep my eyes open.”

When I thought he had got far enough, I went out. I went in the direction of the bar, where I thought I might still find a few people. What I needed was a sort of public contact. Possibly I was giving rein to that primitive feeling in man which tends to present reality to him as something belonging to crowds.

Some ten or twelve passengers were in effect lingering at the bar. The mere fact of the time had made them end up by agglomerating into a single group. An animated discussion was going on. A Syrian with great eagerness, in an oily but almost pure French, was explaining what his ideas were as to the best way of betting on horses. He was talking nonsense; but not as he might have done, because he was mingling primitive superstitions with this modern matter. He was not suggesting hanging amulets round the neck of the horse Sesostriis II. He was altogether positivist in his ideas, but as a conjuror might make use of a handkerchief and a shilling. The only difference being that he was his own dupe. All the time he was talking, two and two made five. At times he would stop to take the whole party to witness, and with an amiable gesture apologize for being personally so very intelligent.

The others replied with the first things that came into their heads. The most resolute seemed to hold by this theory, that though no one could sound more reasonable than the Syrian, yet horse-racing was a matter of experience and not of reason. “On paper,” he said forcibly, “as much as you like. But horses don’t run on paper.” Many times he reiterated the words “On paper.”

He cited cases, which he called "facts of experience." The others supported him. But not a few, had a racecourse been handy, would have taken the Syrian aside to ask him what to back.

I listened without any particular feeling of being cheated. They all, grouped thus in the bar, helped me in spite of everything, to feel that what I had just experienced was real.

X

NEXT morning early, I went on to the sun-deck as the ship was nearing port. The light was exceedingly bright and clear, the air keen. I had as good as had no sleep, but I could not have been more wakeful. It was one of these mornings when one feels thought lying in wait inside one, like a colourless acid in a flask. Its transparency is only equalled by the vigour of its attack and its capacity to strip off impurities from a metal.

Thus, what are called "the phantoms of the night," had no chance of finding grace in my sight. Besides, an after-taste of my excessive emotion still remained in the form of a lethargic responsiveness, perilously near ill humour. I believe I should have found pleasure, at least just then, in recanting and mockery.

I took advantage of this condition of my feelings which fully covered me, to put the event on trial; or rather to re-open it and bring it to some conclusion, for I had spent most of the night debating it.

Carefully and point by point, I went over it again. I am systematic and my mind is naturally critical and positive, accustomed to getting down to facts. So little am I inclined to put up with confused thinking in myself, or to tolerate its proximity, that I had trained myself in the past, when faced with an affirmation of any kind, to estimate its degree of probability, checking the conclusions of my reason by an instantaneous resort to calculation. For example, if I read in the same newspaper that there had been a railway accident between Cordova and Seville with so many dead, and that an earthquake had taken place in the Indian Archipelago with so many dead, I would amuse myself by working out in a few moments and by purely mental operations, what degree of probability lay in each item. Spoken of thus, the pastime

seems utterly pointless—as pretentious as illusory. In effect, when practised for its own sake as a sport, it makes for great agility. There is no attempt to hide from oneself the arbitrary quality of the postulates and co-efficients of the calculation thus improvised. But the lucid agility is what remains. And eventually one realizes one has developed a habit of “falling pat,” in circumstances where most people, even cultured ones, go wrong. In the same way that others have trained themselves to judge at sight, almost to a tenth, the tonnage of a ship, or the area of a piece of ground.

And it was just such disciplines, and all the spiritual hygiene consequent on them, which preserved me from becoming obsessed by doubt. When a problem is worth it, I do not easily let go. I realize it must not be taken from too general a viewpoint, nor with eyes shut to the difficulties in the hope they will vanish, and most importantly, that the more one wants to believe something, the less hurry there should be to accept it. But those who perpetually chew on conclusions without ever being able to make up their minds to swallow them, or those even, who start the same discussion ten times in succession, “because really it is so terribly important,” have always seemed to me complete dotards. I have been acquainted with tremblers of this kind even in what are considered the most daring scientific fields.

Thus, when I had succeeded in satisfactorily reviewing the events of the preceding evening, I did not evade formulating a definite conclusion.

“It is indubitable that a long sentimental fermentation has been going on inside me, which may have laid me open to internal phantasmata. It is not less certain than my sort of mentality, so soon as it regains its balance, repulses them with all its old vigour. Even this morning, in the sunshine I hear the world strike, short and clear, like an empty jar. I feel that I could not insinuate the slightest mystery into it. In the wavelets of this sea I read the glories of Democritus and Brownian movements. Thus, if I see visions, I have also the leisure to unmask them. And the power. My spirit remains capable of denying the complexities of my imagination and my heart. But there is no point in going on about it. What

was true in the night is true in the morning. An event is in question. Well, that event took place."

If I could persuade myself not to go on re-opening the question I should then, once that was accepted, not be able to interfere with the development of its possible consequences. And that I did not desire. In my zeal to make out a case dispassionately and fully, as though it were a law suit, there was this stimulus: that if I succeeded I should have full liberty to use it as a basis for my dreams, and to abandon myself to every eddy of sentiment and speculative adventure, wherever they might care to waft me.

It did not fail. Such an ebullition began almost immediately, and rapidly intensified itself. Now I should find it difficult to explain. Even at that moment I bothered less about explaining it than about feeling its astonishing effects, almost intoxicating as they were. It started that trouble I found so much difficulty in throwing off, which I complained about at the outset of this work, that disorganization of my "sentiment of the universe," which has gone on ever since and which this work is an attempt finally to remedy. From that very moment I ought perhaps to have made the effort of representing these things for myself in writing. But I did not think of it.

I shall not say that into all this tumult of spirit nothing resembling doubt insinuated itself. More exactly, I retained a need to make certain. I did not hope from it for a repetition of the event. I wonder even whether, without confessing it to myself, I did not desire that nothing fresh should happen till we got to Marseilles. Was it a feeling that something had absolutely "come off," which repetition would only spoil; a culminating point beyond which, at least for a time, nothing could be desired: which I preferred rather to contemplate, and let acquire perspective? When I had gone into my cabin and found myself suddenly confronting Lucienne's presence, had I not, apart from the feeling of solemnity, felt also something horribly difficult, perilous even, a sort of fluttering of the living soul above the abyss, to be welcomed mutely with a clutching at the throat: something one would shudder to see happen twice?

In effect, on the succeeding evenings, without intentionally avoiding finding myself under similar conditions to those in which the event had taken place, I did not seek to create them. And without actually avoiding the event, I did not give it much chance to encounter me. I spent much of my time outside my cabin. I went ashore whenever we made harbour. I came back late. Once in, I did not linger about getting into bed, and contrary to my wont I fell asleep almost immediately.

But I was even more impatient than on the preceding voyage to reach Marseilles. The joy of seeing Lucienne again was reinforced by an interest that had extraordinary dramatic quality. I said to myself : " I shall not say anything about it at first. I shall turn the conversation on the ordinary incidents of the voyage. The emotion that might betray me will be easily hidden in the effusions of the return. I shall wait for her to say ' Did nothing special happen to you ? Did you notice anything ? ' "

I thought also : " But if she dare not question me. Suppose the fear of my replying ' I can't think what you mean,' stops her. Suppose she waits too ? "

At the worst, that uncertainty could not last long. I should always be able to allude to it, little by little, and in such a way as at last to make her confide in me before it had lost its point.

All the more, since the boat this time having to have its engines completely overhauled, would give us possibly a full week in Marseilles.

One morning on the sun deck, I ran into the captain, who happened to have an hour to waste. He himself turned the conversation to the subject of Podomiecki.

I asked with an ordinary air of curiosity : " But then have you ever seen him do anything in the least exceptional, conclusive to any degree ? "

" Indubitably. That other evening when you were there, I was disappointed. Instead of all that rigmarole, I thought he was going to show us something. That was why I asked you. Well, once for instance, without mentioning it to anyone, I had worked out a change of route, which I was not even sure I

should put into operation. I had done it in my cabin on a chart, which I then put into a locked drawer. On it I had jotted weather conditions, positions, even depths taken from another chart or from our soundings. Yes! Well, that evening I happened to spend a few minutes with Podomiecki in the purser's cabin. Some allusion had been made to his powers. I say to him, as though a challenge: 'As for me, I should think you had very great powers if you can tell me what I have just put into my drawer.' 'A paper.' 'Naturally, but what paper?' 'A paper thus and thus.' And little by little, without one word being said by me, he describes it all, with mistakes, true, but still, it was overwhelming. You can imagine: degrees of longitude, chosen arbitrarily, as I had thought them out. Even a place where a line was doubled. Another time, he told me about an incident that had happened in my wife's family, which I am absolutely sure she had never so far mentioned to me, for the very good reason that she knew nothing about it: yet later I verified it."

"So that in both cases, the facts seemed to you certain?"

"Absolutely."

"As certain as that the propellers revolve because of the steam from the boilers?"

"Ah! There you are asking. . . . But well . . . the scientific aspect is no concern of mine . . . as certain as anything in everyday life . . . as certain as, if my shoes don't shine much to-day, it is because the bootblack polished them badly."

I looked at the captain. I had before me a good type of normal contemporary, much above the average. A fine wide head, with strong lines: a face open and ruddy. Cheerful eyes, direct, unclouded. In that head, knowledge, restricted but solid, chiefly scientific and technical. Culture somewhat summary, with no personal refinements, but in which nevertheless the essentials of our civilization were represented. Probably a basis of religious beliefs of the nature of childhood impressions, as an outlet for emotion and poetry, which he does not give a thought to. "Religion does no harm to anybody. It is the sea-faring tradition. One of the mainstays of morality. (Crews have fallen off a good deal in that respect.)

It enhances the principal nature of the ceremonies in life. A sort of immaterial handshake at very difficult moments (like a good pipe). It does not explain everything, but it helps us to be patient when science cannot explain everything. Besides, a religion for those born into it is like a fatherland. Without it there would be no reason for preferring any in particular from among the most important. And perhaps they would learn to do without it."

I thought to myself: "The case of Podomiecki interests him. He has been intimately associated with facts there and he cannot perceive the slightest possibility of error: facts in which the probability is cent per cent. But when I compare the certainty which he feels about it with what he gets from a scientifically established fact, it embarrasses him. He falls back on certitudes much less worthy of credence, on the humble evidence of daily life. If I compared that with the vague incertitude he feels about religious ideas and made him appreciate, for instance, that Podomiecki with ease supplied proofs such as only the first 'testifiers' of new religions are accepted as having vouchsafed to them, he might perhaps be still more embarrassed; he would think me 'strange' and would consider me a man who made 'extraordinary comparisons,' and confounded what ought not to be confounded."

Aloud, as temperately as I could, I insinuated: "Yet there is one thing you must surely have taken into consideration. A single fact, like these, once it was definitely established, would throw doubt on everything."

"Doubt on everything? How?"

"Why yes! Imagine that while steaming along the coast of a continent, we are met by a vessel coming from the coast in charge of two or three individuals differing absolutely from men: of an entirely different species."

"Well?"

"What would you say of the navigator who lacked the curiosity to go ashore and investigate? Because time was lacking. Good. He has his route to follow. But what would you say if he gave no more thought to the matter?"

"The two things are not the same."

"That is, in the case of the navigator, it's much less serious."

After all, the continent is not his. What takes place on it can go on taking place. It can remain as remote from him as if it happened on another planet."

"But I've shown you that I do think about it, since we are talking about it now."

"You think about it sometimes. More exactly you have not forgotten about it. But from the day that happened to you, your life has not changed in the slightest."

"You surely don't mean . . . what do you call a change of life?"

"Change your way of seeing things ; the way you feel all through the day, about yourself and everything else, the importance you attach to reality, to happenings ; your intuition as to what is possible and impossible, your ideas as to the ends, the advantages to be attained ; your perspective of destiny ; even what the fact that you are alive and on earth may signify to you, the assumptions or absence of assumptions that are based on it. . . . Not to mention of course the value you attach to your scientific background."

"Come ! Come ! You seriously think a little thing like that should be enough to knock a man of sane mind off his balance? "

He laughed.

"Well, but what? " I continued. "I am a plain man. If a fact of that kind seems to me true and possible, I have to think there are also thousands and thousands of others, also true and possible. Or rather, that together they form a universe, an immense universe. And then I feel it there, round me, always. I am not so silly as to imagine one can relegate it to distant latitudes into which no one ever ventures, an antarctica for instance. Of two things, one. Either it does not exist ; or if it exists, it is here under my feet, here within touch of my hand, here behind any partition. I cannot take another step without thinking of it. How can you expect me to think otherwise than that the objects and people which surround me—as I have so far pictured them, by the help of science and my common sense—make one common surface, a sort of precisely conditioned background? I see the fact in question as the tiniest fraction projecting beyond this immense universe which is behind us, about us, and very close to us. I am unable any longer to gaze at any particular part of that

background, without telling myself that something may suddenly pass through, that it merely awaits the occasion, in fact ; or without seeing the background bulge under the pressure from behind of that immense universe. . . . And the less I had doubted till then, the less suspicious I had been of that background, the more overwhelmed I should be. They can say anything they like to reassure me, but it is all one to me, just theorizing and philosophic claptrap."

"One moment. There is a very simple means by which you can find out how you stand. I have only to arrange a new party with Podomiecki. We will try and start him off."

I assume an air of reflection. Then : "No, I would just as soon not."

"But why ?"

"If it is all nonsense, what would be the good ? But if there is something to it, I am very well as I am."

"So, this time, you must be the navigator who refuses to go and investigate."

I had made pretence of having a certain attitude. But yet I felt that such an attitude could be natural and human, and that no doubt the behaviour of numbers of men, confronted with a world which must frequently have seemed on the point of betraying itself, and the continuation of an astonishing *status quo*, could be explained by it.

The captain went off to see to something. I looked after him. "Five minutes more and he won't be giving a thought to our talk."

For a moment I saw my cabin again that night, filled with electric light, and Lucienne's presence against the wall.

Then my eyes turned again to the captain's silhouette, as he climbed the ladder to the bridge.

"The least out-of-the-ordinary of men. The most conventional. He is not responsible for his reactions. They cost him no special effort. He doesn't even feel he is defending the *status quo*. In defence of law and order, though he does not know it. Not like a policeman who can have no doubts about his occupation. But like a tax collector."

Then reverting to myself, I added : "And myself? What about my own position?"

But for the moment I did not want to find an answer.

Soon after, possibly the same day, while conversing with Bompard, I said as though by an afterthought : "It's curious how some people lack mental coherence. The captain has been talking to me again about Podomiecki. He takes him seriously. He has witnessed certain things which have convinced him. Good. Whether the captain's discernment is particularly subtle is not in question. He was convinced, and that is all there is to be said about it. But what seems astounding is that he does not attach any importance to it. Yet no one could accuse him of being obtuse. He is perfectly able to appreciate that even one of the facts cited, if established, would undermine with increasing completeness a host of acquired ideas, and above all, suddenly change the general aspect of the universe, giving it a different aspect, enigmatic and disquieting in a different sort of way. No question then of suddenly getting worked up about Avogadro's law, or the last photograph of a nebula. . . . You think to yourself : "No . . . But then?" And yet you must not think he is a sceptic, or doesn't give a hang for anything. Assuredly not. But the idea does not occur to him that in admitting a fact of such an order, only one even, he is probably shattering to the ground his whole little materialist philosophy."

Bompard made a slight movement with his head and shoulders. "Is it better he should realize it?"

"That's not the point."

Bompard meditated, with an embarrassed evasive expression. Finally he said : "You know, when they tell us that humanity, age after age, has gone on marching towards the light, advancing bravely into the unknown to open it up, I personally do not believe it. It is an image, or sort of myth, which before it was made commonplace by inaugural speeches, might have had a certain beauty. But I would rather imagine a different image, a different myth ; people whom something annoyed, not at all heroic : peasants who raise with whatever comes to hand, a

wall, a rampart around their village, to be left in peace. Yes, my idea is that there was a time when humanity knew heaps of things that we regret deeply we do not know. I am not thinking of those old initiates handing down secrets which in time got lost. The initiates, if they ever existed, must have been old bonzes, men of position and decorations, bandying conventional phrases and empty theories with each other. No, it's simpler than all that. Any man then knew things we don't know, lived them, practised them daily. Much too often in fact. What we call the unknown was an integral part of them, its perpetual incursions ended by sickening them. The result was that the most important consideration for a long time became how to get rid of it. And fundamentally the great success of science, from the time of the Renaissance, but even before that, with the Greeks, originates in that fact. Nothing similar had so far been discovered. Earthworks gave place to walls of stone. Thereafter they could be certain sure they would know no more (I mean of what they found so sickening). Immediately some such fact tried to get over the wall, biff, off went its head! Think! Why there must have been thousands of individual happenings like that since modern science and philosophy made the pretence of marching towards the unknown and greeting it with open arms. Not half! They greeted them with rods. And yet you seriously believe in those people who spend their time lamenting our ignorance of everything essential: yes, those who spend their time banging their heads against the wall with dramatic expressions. It's a farce, but perhaps not for all of them. It is humanity which is made a farce because of them. And don't go imagining that the Church and priests differ in that respect from the science and philosophy they pretend to combat. Quarrels of allies! They manage so as to tame a miracle every fifty years. They put it in a cage and exhibit it. But go and ask them to promulgate a decree to the effect that the age of miracles has returned, that the shooting season has begun, that mystery can enter free of charge. Ha! Ha!"

As he talked, I was looking at a Bompard I had hardly suspected. He seemed suddenly profoundly fraternal, more profoundly so than he could himself have imagined.

"But listen," I said, "what you are now suggesting has important consequences."

"You think so?"

"Why, yes. It implies—how express it—a sort of revolutionary sentiment."

"Pouh!"

"It makes one think of people meeting by chance, under some despotic régime and with much precaution, beginning to talk openly to each other, till at last encouraged and reassured, they end by finally convincing themselves they are living in a state of illegitimate, stifling, oppression: which can only endure because of the general flabby complicity."

He made a sudden gesture. I went on immediately. "I mean that personally, had I witnessed one of the prodigies in question, one only, it would have been sufficient to make your words inflame that revolutionary sentiment in me. For I am not particularly brawny, nor do I lay claim to any special virtue. But what I am not afraid of are the consequences of my thoughts. Intellectually I never lie to myself."

"Excuse me. Don't make me say something I haven't said. I am very far from wanting a revolution. I can't help finding it laughable when I see science strut off to conquer the unknown, with all its artillery deployed in advance, or religion calling pompously on the name of mystery even while it attacks it from behind with every reinforcement in its power. And yet it seems to me that deeply they are rendering us a service in doing so, a service which we demand of them."

"That a certain empty-headed majority demands, I admit. And what then?"

"Ah yes! We ask them to do for humanity what each of us does for himself to the best of his ability."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The wall round the village is one aspect of the myth. But can you think otherwise than that every man has built his own little wall, inside. You may tell me that nowadays we are all born with ready-made walls; or that we have been taught from infancy to build them up, even before we knew what purpose they were to serve. That may be. It comes to the same thing, eh? If you ever came in contact with mystery, not from

outside but from within, obstructions in the way would certainly in some degree be due to science and conventional ideas. But apart from that, could the way be free? I think not. Instinct—of itself—for it has become an instinct, would see that it blocked the way. The proof is, does anything ever happen to you from that source?"

"It proves that there is either in effect a wall, or that behind what you assume to be a wall, nothing exists."

"Exactly. One ends by assuring oneself that there is nothing. So one can sleep peacefully in bed."

He laughed.

"But people like Podomiecki, where do they come in?"

"Oh, that is not my business. Perhaps they too are conjurers exploiting the vague regret there is in all of us. Perhaps they are the rebels and agitators. In any case there are enough charlatans among them to discredit the rest. What more can one want?"

Some hours later, the thought suddenly struck me that what I had experienced might have some dreadful significance. For days it had been an inspiration, and yet it might mean death, some cry for aid in supreme peril. Perhaps I had not understood what it announced to me. I seemed to remember stories that had dealt with similar warnings. I also saw again the vault in the Galician story, and the living corpse calling for help.

After having resisted for about an hour, during which I reproached myself either for my blindness, which seemed inexplicable to me now, or for my anguish, which I strove to make seem idiotic and superstitious, I went to look for Podomiecki.

He was due to leave us at the next stop, and was already packing his trunks. I was somewhat ashamed of my errand. But I would have accepted moral aid just then from any source.

The Pole was very cheerful. The excuse I made for visiting him was his early disembarkation, and he seemed to find my politeness very natural. He asked a number of practical questions about the Greek Islands and the dates our liners would

call. I waited in vain for an opportunity to introduce the preliminary phrases I had got ready.

But then, of himself, with no transition other than a silence, and without raising his eyes from the suit-case, into which he was folding his neckties, he said, in a tone very different from that of polite conversation : " You are in great anxiety, I can see. But you must not be, in this splendid weather."

Then : " I don't exactly know what it is you fear. Really I do not know. But it is false. That I do know." (He had slightly raised his voice.)

He turned towards me with a smile in which there was the most human kindliness, then began again to pack his ties.

Instantaneously, I conjured up a similar scene in America ; the Pole with the same smile, and the same brevity, delivering some rich important person from his torment, and all that might suddenly well up in the other man's heart for him.

I all but ventured, in a rush of sympathy, to put to him some of the questions that so perpetually haunted me. But he had reverted to the most ordinary things and seemed to find it extremely funny that a stiff collar would not fit into a leather box.

XI

OUR boat was due to reach Marseilles at eleven in the morning. We were forty minutes late by the time we moored. It was past noon before I could go ashore with Lucienne.

I suggested lunching in a little restaurant we knew. We found a quiet corner. It seemed, I do not know why, that she would feel less embarrassed than at home when the moment came to ask me the extraordinary question I was waiting for.

That first hour was very tender, and apparently most confiding. But Lucienne made no allusion to anything. I took care also not to influence her, even unwittingly. We had plenty of time in front of us. It seemed clear to me that, of all the proofs of the happenings I could wish for, this would be the most positive and eradicate all doubt. I did not want to risk diminishing it. I kept careful watch for any indication of confession from Lucienne and carefully considered each of my phrases, each of my thoughts almost, so as not to introduce any personal bias.

After the meal I suggested walking a little through the quiet streets. It was a little easier for me to observe Lucienne unobserved, than when she was facing me. A number of very slight changes had occurred in her face. Her eyes, encircled by a touch of shadow, had a sort of less immediate glow: I mean seemed fixed on something indefinite, as if what they sought was at a distance. She no longer smiled in the same fashion. Such words as "a face that has become spiritualized" would have occurred to me, had they not seemed odiously obvious and conventional. I preferred to think of things I love, which perhaps contain the same meaning, though protecting it from the commonplaces of the phrase; such as certain female faces of the Middle Ages to be seen in cathedral porches or paintings; certain songs of such a nature that merely to hear the first eight notes of them is enough to

suddenly reveal a new mysterious capacity in woman, and make the universe grow richer by a sort of Christian dimension one had overlooked.

In this manner I found again the reveries of our engagement period. But now they seemed richer, they beckoned as though to draw me on, and touched me more profoundly. Their sweetness made it possible for me patiently to bear the period of waiting for her confession, or her question ; though neither came.

I decided on a means which seemed to me likely to deliver Lucienne of her secret and not diminish in my eyes its value as a proof.

At about two, I said to her : " As we are not very far from the boat I would like to go back to it before we go home. Come with me. There are two or three jobs I have to clear up. That will save going back later."

She accepted, without enabling me to see whether she did it simply to oblige me, or whether the matter had for her too some other significance.

On board I adopted a leisurely sort of pace. I went by a roundabout way. I appeared to be showing her over the boat yet again. I led her along the deck on which I had wandered that evening when we all met in the captain's cabin. I tried to find the part of the rail I had leaned against. And I stopped there as though to cast a glance at the docks. Lucienne stopped and looked too. She smiled. She leant tenderly against me. Perhaps a sudden contraction of the muscles ran along my hand and arm. But plenty of impulses from the heart could have accounted for that. I dared not question her face too openly.

Then I thought that what was against us was the way things looked. What likeness was there between this view of docks, crammed with boats in sunlight, and the languid deserted night of the Lybian Sea?

I led the way to my cabin. When we got to the door, I searched in my pockets, elaborately, as though I had difficulty in finding my keys. Lucienne waited in the calmest way. Her glance fell absently upon the metal door.

I said to her : " You remember ? "

"Why, yes, of course."

I opened it.

Lucienne went before me into the cabin. She seemed moved. A suspicion of tears clouded her eyes. But I was more moved than she. I wanted to slip away suddenly.

"Listen," I said to her, masking the change in my voice, "rest here a few moments. And in the meantime, I can see to two or three things that need my attention. That won't take long and then I shall come and fetch you."

I returned in some fifteen minutes. First of all I went into my office. Lucienne was no longer there. Nothing had been moved. But I saw, through the empty recess, that the lights had been turned on in the next room. On the two nickel taps, the light from the electric light bulbs glittered more brightly than that which came from the porthole. The brightness of the room was compounded of daylight, which dominated one side : and on the other it melted into a sort of light in which time seems to pass in nocturnal intimacy.

I went on. I passed through the empty recess. Lucienne was sitting on my bunk in the same position as that other night.

I came to a standstill to look at her. It was so important to look, the whole essence of the drama was so much in looking, that I passed, it might have been, more than a minute doing that only, trembling deep within myself at what I saw, and revealing no outward sign.

Lucienne rose and said : "Pierre, let us go."

She took my arm. Her fingers, which she had closed upon my arm as though by chance, almost dug into my flesh. A feeling of anxiety, of supplication, was communicated to me.

I kissed her. I clasped her very tightly to me as I kissed her on the temple. We went out.

In all that week we did not manage to break our silence. It is not difficult for me to recapture the feeling of inhibition which I had then. It takes possession of me now. To such a point that a trifle more would stop my writing. But, as then, what caused it still remains obscure.

Had I received the proof I waited for? No, not that, but another, which perhaps moved me more, which convinced but did not appease me. Although I told myself no actual words could have been more precise than the mute allusion, I still continued to expect them. Besides, although I no longer felt the urge to make sure, I still retained the desire to know. I had not become the sort of sentimentalist whom truth affects in inverse ratio to the light it throws. What in essence was that event of which I could only get to know the outer aspects? How had Lucienne striven, and how succeeded? What had she passed through? What experiences, explorations and hidden resourcefulness had been needed? In one sense, my curiosity had only augmented. But I dared not be the first to infringe that silence which Lucienne, as it were, had stretched between us.

All our acts were caught in it. They also helped us to keep it intact. Each of our acts seemed pregnant with what we did not say. And as each of them, in its own way, made it perceptible and present, the moment when it would find no issue other than words was indefinitely retarded.

For example, Lucienne would sit down to the piano. And it was to me, or rather to both of us, and to avoid talking, that she played. Sitting near her, I would listen to her repeating passages from works we knew. Lucienne did not appear to choose them for any bearing they might have on our situation. Often she would happen to open that page by chance. Her interpretation was always of the utmost simplicity. She was too much a musician unscrupulously to modify a score she loved to suit her emotions of the moment.

But it was music in its general function from which, one would have said, Lucienne obtained a new service. At moments there would be tinkling harmonies, then an isolated note, then this or that burst of sounds, reverberating suddenly in me, not as the token, but as the perception, the appearance from elsewhere, in a form simple and direct, of that universe which Lucienne and I tacitly accepted, that universe in which the happening we did not speak about was possible.

I did not even ask myself whether Lucienne inspired that music with meanings and a message for my benefit. The

effect upon me was something ampler and more free. Around the thoughts which bore upon that happening, and which continually preoccupied me, still in fact disconcerted me, because they all more or less threw doubt on what till then I had called Nature, Lucienne, by degrees and in the form of music, gradually created the signs of a natural environment.

As to our relations in the flesh, far from being favourable to some decisive confidence, my impression is that they too helped to stave it off.

On returning from this second voyage I already suspected, though I did not know of the pages I gave earlier, that Lucienne's thoughts had travelled a long way since those enthusiastic days of our "kingdom of the flesh." I prepared myself therefore to deal, not with a return of modesty, but with something newer and more grave. On the other hand, I did not want to make her feel that my own ardour had grown cold for causes she could only have supposed commonplace and depressing. This resulted in some embarrassment, which the manner in which we spent our first hours together left me time to dispel.

Shortly after we had returned home from the harbour, Lucienne, as though to try her piano for me, having on the last occasion merely showed it me, invited me to sit near her, and began to play. I listened in the state of feeling I have just described. Nevertheless, I saw her body. The movements she made in playing, helped to make her more real, to shine forth. My main thoughts were not concerned with her body itself. But I was not trying to ignore it either. I let it have its usual effect on me, with the result that, by degrees, various depths of emotion were affected. I desired her body. I desired it with the fervour, the immense variety of motives of our first days together. I worshipped her beauty, her gestures. The thought of all those flexions of the flesh which her playing caused, and by which love seemed so much the loser, which I could not gather or have again, despite all my kisses and caresses, made me intensely jealous of the music, and impatient for the happiness that would overwhelm me when Lucienne would again be naked on the bed. And all the time I kept on conjuring up the extraordinary circumstances, which in the last days had laboured to transform the universe in my eyes. They

kept on reverting to Lucienne as to their origin, obvious yet inexplicable. My glances probed all that was visible of her, to try and grasp how it could make invisibility apparent. I listened as one by one her notes, mysterious as herself, flew into space, that space surrounding me. And I got used to feeling a universe was real, in which not only what was unspoken was possible, but in which two lovers could, at a distance, augmented by degrees, by a succession of throbbings, of mental pulsations, together take part in that infinitely remote, but always poignant, and always precious union of their bodies in one bed.

When afterwards I drew Lucienne into the bedroom, I found again something of that variety of emotions: even though the sudden immensity of the joy which inundated me, with her body rendered up, could have taken entire possession of me, and replunged me, without memory or anxieties, into the pure religion of sex. I realized that the condition of amorous excitement, to the point at which I experienced it whenever with Lucienne, did indeed result in enclosing us within the horizons of the flesh, when we desired to be enchanted and protected by them: but that it also lent itself, and without suffering destruction, to the most difficult adventures of the soul, demanding only to be of service to it, if the soul were not so ignorantly proud as to treat it as an enemy. Therefore I no longer feared to shock my new Lucienne in turning to her flesh. But my adoration seemed too familiar to me. More humble forms of worship, more ceremonious, idolatrous even, formed the background of my thoughts. I conjured up an idol, a priestess, accepting caresses like an incense, freely and openly, like a fluid substance which could be used by her for the elaboration of those transports she found necessary to enable her to breathe a rarer air.

At other moments, I had very forcibly the feeling that the whole series of carnal acts between Lucienne and myself was tending to become a warp and weft of symbolic rites. These rites seemed to me necessary, as all who believe in an invisible order believe rites may be. Rites do not only serve to represent what is not seen, or recall it to forgetful man. In some degree it is stimulated by them. And its resuscitation and continuity

is helped by them. They encourage and, as it were, draw forth the invisible.

The result was that I came to experience certain protracted moments in which sensuality became both piercing keen and yet remained undifferentiated : as though it was the intense condition of a miracle, the understanding of which was beyond me, but by which the very laws of the world of the flesh, on some other plane, could be overcome.

Nothing in Lucienne's attitude stood in the way of my believing that she for her part had established a harmony between the new emotions of her spirit and love. But that too was part of our silence.

XII

The formal confirmation and the explanations which at that time were not in my possession and which, to speak frankly, I have never had since, shall I find them now in Lucienne's notes? Possibly I may not have been far from it that day I forced myself to shut the book.

I am so eager to find out the main thing that I jump a section of the book—some fifty pages—to get to the date of the event. There will always be time to go back and pick up the threads.

The very date of the event? Perhaps I am being too impatient. I risk spoiling my curiosity, by wanting to minister to it too rapidly. Let us take a few days earlier.

TO-NIGHT too I am sure I found the vessel. How can I be sure? Because I recognize it. I could not now mistake it for any other. Yet it may have been a dream. If I could only get clear how it is I find it, I should feel more certainty. But it seems to be impossible. If I concentrate too much on the act itself, it weakens and then stops. I must think only of the object.

Three days only have passed since I convinced myself I can find the ship again. I must therefore have taken weeks to learn. Four hours, five hours at a time, some evenings, I have groped: and now I see it can happen in a few moments.

And that is the reason too why it is so difficult to know exactly what one is doing. It is when one is going wrong, when one is groping, that one realizes best what one is doing. Even in those long evenings of groping, it was what was no good, what led nowhere, that I was most clearly conscious of.

I say "three days only." Perhaps that is not exact. At certain moments I wonder whether it did not begin much

earlier. Whether there was not at a very early stage, quite tiny fragments of something *real*, quite tiny beginnings of exact responses mingled with the rest.

When the act has most satisfactorily succeeded, the same reflection always occurs to me, which I feel to be very encouraging, but which I hesitate to write down because it seems so childishly obvious. "You see, the important thing is not to make mistakes : and also not to do what you ought to do." Yes, one suddenly has the feeling that all it asks is to come into being, that it is quite simple, that it was waiting for you to need or desire it. And that the most fruitful part of the effort was the laying aside of false impulses, misdirected efforts, miscalculated thrusts ; and the calming in oneself of all the agitation, which one mistakenly, and as a consequence of bad habits, brings about : and to feel confidence in oneself.

And yet, if one did not begin with a great effort, would one ever get anywhere ?

The moment of breaking away ; of being at a distance. That is what happens first. I know it well now. I have got used to it. One has a feeling of surging up, relaxing suddenly, and thrusting away the place in which one was, as in swimming. It is the body which is in that place ; let it remain there. And it is from it, and bracing oneself against it, that one leaps forth.

The distance seems immense, suddenly. Or rather, one is "distant" almost instantaneously. As if that was what mattered and not the greater or less distance. The impression is not of the distance widening by degrees. Or else it was so obscure a part of the action that it is difficult to follow.

Then there is a moment of choice. It is not a troubled moment. On the contrary. I visualize it intensely. It would be impossible to be more conscious of what is happening. But I can't find the words for it. It is as though a sifting out took place most rapidly, most easily, because all the things between which you must choose are equally illuminated and at an equal distance. What always comes to my mind is the comparison with a bird which, from above, dominates the countryside, and which needs but a second in which to decide before it alights, which of the roofs so clearly presented to it,

it will choose. But it is a comparison much more suggested by words than by the feeling. One does not feel at all one is dominating, that one is choosing from above. One feels much more shut in, much more inside than that. It is in the very thickness of things that one sifts out the place in which one wants to be. I was going to say in the undergrowth. But it is not an undergrowth

There is also the feeling of floating. How does that fit in with what I have tried to say? As if in the first place one betook oneself casually in two or three directions, but almost motionlessly, meanwhile waiting for the place to grow clearly visible, for the ship to appear clearly: not even all the ship, the spot almost, on which one would like to be, which one has already acquired the habit of looking for.

That is the moment when one speeds forth and joins it in a flash.

It is he. I recognize him well. Pierre. He is leaning on the rail. A buoy is fixed near him which has large black letters on it and ropes painted white. I see that distinctly, although it is rather dark.

He is looking out to sea.

His presence. He is present. At last I have got that. He is present to me, as present as when we are together. Are we not together? No, not yet. I am still not present to him. He does not know yet I am here.

I burn with impatience to make a sign to him, prepare him. And yet I do not want to prepare him until I am certain he can see me. What use would a sign be which he could not understand, which possibly he might not even notice?

I feel clearly that for him, even if he turned towards me, I should be invisible. What tells me that? Because my own presence seems to lack something, and I realize it and it embarrasses me. I have not entirely translated myself. In the fact that I am on the ship's deck, behind Pierre leaning, there is still this, namely that I want to be there. There is still too much of that vacillation which belongs to moments of effort or relaxation of the mind. I am not completely forced

to admit I am there. Nor to remain. I do not weigh solidly enough upon the deck. I can detach myself from it with too great ease.

It is as though so little would be needed to make my presence actual. . . . Some encouragement. A faith that did not only come from myself.

If suddenly Pierre felt I was here, if of himself he turned about, if he looked at the place where I am, if he began to see me, it seems to me my power to be present would be reinforced, that only then should I be in this spot. (I still think too much of the other place, of the room in the apartment at Marseilles. I can even hear the clanging of a tram.)

Pierre does not turn.

A frightful distress takes hold of me. I tell myself suddenly that everything depends on Pierre ; that nothing depends on me any more, that the weeks my seeking have cost me may be annihilated, if Pierre to-night does not know I am here. All my courage will go, all my power. Everything will be undone, lost. Pierre ! Pierre !

I do not ask him to make any effort. Only let him see. Let him not be so absent-minded, and feel that his Lucienne, his wife, is present.

I want to go up to him, touch his shoulder. But I am not sure of being able to do so in a way he will feel. And if he did not feel anything, all my courage would go. All would be over.

I go nearer. I try to touch him. My movements are uncertain. I direct them badly. Is it his arm or his shoulder that I touch ?

I start back immediately. He does not move. But now he moves a little. He straightens a little, takes his elbows from the rail.

He turns round, slowly. Not like someone who has just been touched on the shoulder. He crosses his arms. He looks straight in front of him, almost at me. He looks for a long time, shifting his head and eyes a little. But he does not really seem to be seeking for something. He does not search the shadow in which I am standing, yet it is very transparent. The lamps at intervals along the deck give light. It seems to

me as if this shadow is just what I need in order to see well.

Am I then so invisible, even for him ?

I dare not think he senses something, that he is wondering.

Pierre ! Pierre !

And yet he seems anxious, startled.

Pierre !

He makes a sudden movement, touches himself or feels for something. There is a moment when what I see turns confused, as if some luminous breath made the shapes quiver.

And yet all I divine is that Pierre is moving away.

The date marked on the note-book corresponds exactly with that of the gathering in the captain's rooms. I verified the latter date absolutely (in two different ways).

Remains the question of time ? On referring to the book, a page earlier than those from which I have made up my extract, I find, for the same evening the time 9.30 mentioned. The page relates to the preparations, the phases of a period of withdrawal and passivity, the length of which is not stated. The moment when I was leaning over the taffrail, before going to the captain's, was between 10.45 and 10.50, ship's time. The last adjustment of the clock must have taken place at noon that same day and in the vicinity of 12 deg. longitude E. Thus we were a good three quarters of an hour in advance of Marseilles time.

The calculations I here employ can only be approximate. Yet they reveal that the times agree as nearly as could be wished.

To-day I shall begin a little earlier. I haven't forgotten they are moving farther east.

I searched for him a long time in various parts of the boat. Without finding him.

Now I have found him. I have gone into his outer cabin. I softly opened the door and then shut it. At least, I feel as

though I had. . . . Something indeed seems missing from the act. I did not feel with reality enough the weight of the door to be pushed, nor the subsequent thud of the closing door. I would have liked to have felt it. Everything when I come near to Pierre must happen as actually as possible, and entirely in the reality he knows, and can himself feel.

At first I am dazed almost into a state of blindness, almost into a sort of giddiness, by the excess of light there is here.

By degrees I accustom myself. I piece together the arrangements of the cabin. In any case I know them by heart. My reminiscences help me to pierce this mist of light.

I see him, him. He is sitting in his arm-chair, his body thrown back a little. He happens to be facing me for I am still quite close to the door. If I have really succeeded in opening, then shutting the door, he must have seen and heard. He could not have failed to ask himself what miracle, what mysterious thing had entered?

Nevertheless, I am sure he is on the watch. To-day he moves his head like someone who is seeking, smelling out. Heavens! My hopes return.

With all my might I try to be as present as I can. I weigh down on myself. I drag myself down to the floor. I touch the partition behind me. I definitely feel it.

So that he may have more chance of seeing me, I shall move. For instance, I shall pass right through the cabin, in front of him, and go into the next. I remember where the basin is. I shall try and get as far as that.

Immediately I move, the giddiness of the light begins again. Everything goes to pieces, and it is as though my own presence becomes less.

I divine the communicating door. But I know it may be shut by a curtain. And I cannot see whether or not the curtain is drawn over it.

I see better. I perceive the two basin taps, which glitter. Their gleam, though very bright, does not bother me. I walk towards them.

Suddenly I feel overcome by a sort of fatigue. I cannot go on any longer. I feel I must withdraw myself from this place, disappear. I feel as though I am called back to the room in the

Marseilles apartment, brought back, dragged back. I hear the noises in the street again, the repeated clanging of the tram.

I think again of my fatigue of last night. Was it real fatigue? I mean, was it actually the strength to continue that failed me? Yet I am not conscious of having made any great effort except for short moments. At times even, it seems that I am abandoning myself to an impulse which does not issue from me, that I am submitting to something that offers itself to me.

I know they should be reaching Alexandria to-day at about 2 p.m., and be leaving at about one in the morning. I tell myself that it is useless to look for Pierre to-night. He will have wanted to go ashore, walk about the town. I imagine him at this moment sitting on the terrace of a café with his colleagues, with Bompard, whom he has told me about. Later they will get into the launch and go back to the ship. He won't feel like sleeping. He may not get back to his cabin till very late.

Nevertheless I do not want to pass the whole of this evening without making some effort to get in touch with him. . . .

It seems to me that I have indeed found the ship again, that I am actually on it. But all the time the questions I put to myself trouble me, prevent me being sure of the place where I think I am : make it, as it were, waver and vanish.

I get the impression that the ship is at sea, steaming ahead. Yet I know that by this time it must surely be in port. I see it full of people, the saloons full of life as on most evenings. Yet many of the passengers must have gone ashore, and the others will have stayed aboard in order to go to bed early and not stay up late in the saloons. It must therefore be imagination, more or less. Something mingles with these impressions, like the very stuff of dreams. Without the particulars that Pierre gave me, I should not have been aware of it. By myself I should not have had any means of sifting one from another. That idea affects me, robs me of my confidence and courage. . . .

I pass in front of the door of his cabin. I shall not go in. I might possibly have the illusion I was seeing him. And as I

know almost for sure that he is not there, I do not want to have to admit I am deceiving myself. I must be able to go on saying to myself, at least where he is concerned "I am not dreaming."

For some days now I cannot manage to sleep. It is not ordinary insomnia, as I may at times have known it. I am not agitated at all. I do not get into a state, trying to fall off to sleep. The slight cares of the day, noises, do not harass me. I have withdrawn so completely into myself that anybody else in my place might mistake it for sleep.

But I know I am awake, that all my being is vigilant, that my soul refuses to renounce a certain condition which is of great importance to it.

I have never experienced anything even slightly resembling it, except in the most exalted days of our "kingdom of the flesh." Then too my soul refused to abandon, even for a few hours, that "kingdom" into which it had entered, in which it lived and breathed as in some perpetual miracle. I always found it natural, welcome, for Pierre to want my body, and it was always ready. Not for a moment did the very feel of love ever leave me. I did not rest from it, nor could it ever satiate me. It would have seemed cowardly and unworthy of the happiness with which I was overwhelmed to slip from its grasp, its sweet abiding hurt. At night I slept, so to speak, but amorously.

To-day, Friday, I absolutely must find Pierre again, and he must see me. I feel I have deserved it. I am full of courage and confidence. To be altogether present to him those other times, all I lacked was a kind of daring, which to-night I possess. I feel strong, capable of anything. Separation practically exists no longer. One thrust only is needed.

The ship must be beyond Beirut by now, moving up the gulf. It is nearly ten here. Midnight, there!

As I feel what is going to follow, I at once check up the references. The date is indeed the same. The position of the

boat was not, that night, as presumed by Lucienne, going by the indications I had given her. We had entered Alexandria fourteen hours late. There we had remained, because of the engines, fifteen hours instead of eleven. Thus the night in question, we were well below Beirut. But since by noon we had certainly passed the 30th degree, and afterwards turned in the direction of the gulf of Alexandretta without gaining more than three or four degrees of longitude more, the times worked out by Lucienne remained valid.

I enter the first cabin. This time, too, the double motion of the door takes place without that fullness of reality I wanted. Why is that ?

But as soon as I am in, I feel that my presence is becoming such that Pierre will be obliged to see me.

And in fact, he does look at me. Beyond any question. He follows my movements.

The excess of light still bothers me a great deal. I retrace my path, as on the other occasion. I go through the empty recess. I advance towards the wash-basin, the two taps of which are admirably distinct. I lean forward. I stretch out both hands. I touch the two taps. Very distinctly, I feel the cold of the metal, its shape.

On my right, I find Pierre's room ; the bunk. I move towards it. I touch the bunk. I shall sit down there, facing the empty recess. I shall wait. I shall have the courage to wait. If Pierre has seen me, he will not be able to prevent himself coming. Even if he is stupefied to the point of terror. Even if he thinks himself hallucinated.

I hear him get up. He goes through the empty recess. He sees me and stops.

It is not possible to doubt. A face which looks and recognizes, shows it in all manner of ways. I see my presence reflected in him. And he does not look at me as at a vague form. His eyes see me, once more, complete : the same, I know it. Even my dress he recognizes. For an instant his gaze rests on my hair, because since he went I have slightly changed the style.

He has no fear of me. (Heavens ! it's true he might have been afraid of me. What a horrible idea.) A sort of profound astonishment has possession of him, yet he is calm and happy. Because I smile at him, he smiles back. I am sure his thoughts are full of tender, immense outpourings for me. He is thanking me. He is saying with his gaze : " Yes, there you are, I see you. We are together." He says my name to me. He says " Lucienne " to me.

I dare not move. I dare wish nothing more. It is as though I had come to the limit, the last extremity of what is permitted me. It is as though if I asked, if I attempted to obtain even a fraction more, it would be death, the " kingdom of death."

I passed the night drunk with my triumph. I passed beyond the night, borne upon my triumph. Love has kept its promise. My heart overflows with hymns. Love would not let me longer tear my hands against the wall of separation, on the brambles of separation.

I have rejoined Pierre : rejoined. I cannot exhaust the immensity of that word. I hold that word as one might hold one of those very long glasses, flowering like a calyx, full of a liquor to be sucked up without ever being able to empty it. Rejoined. Think, O heart, what absence was, distance, that distance which could not hold out against love, that distance which every night grew greater, which every night love undermined so much more quickly, that at last it fell, shattered into bits.

How strange the paths of love ! At the beginning it drew me by the flesh. It drew me as into a palace filled with gold, and feasting, and music. There I was shut in. I thought myself imprisoned there. Drunk with feasting, but a prisoner. Yes, at last I saw the " kingdom " was a prison. And behold, it is love itself who also delivers me. It was in prison itself that the underground tunnel of escape had to be discovered.

But that thought is ungrateful and impious. I should not talk of prison. Love has never imprisoned me. Only united me. But it wanted to allow me time to discover one by one the

miracles of union, and penetrate deep into it and taste its delights, and roll in it with joy and long to die in it.

This triumph I feel like a deliverance, like an escape, when I think of my own body. But I feel it like a union when I think of my beloved.

Love, which had promised to tear me from myself, to unite me to an existence worthy of adoration. Love, whose promise I one night heard, hugging myself and trembling, while the two clocks struck one against the other, because that promise was also a sort of sentence, and because something was doomed.

The promise has been kept. Accomplished! Worn out! Does our union desire nothing more? Desire *me* no more?

I tremble afresh.

I know our union has stopped, that it holds back still. That night, Pierre and I stood facing each other like betrothed lovers. Ashamed, some ban prevented us from falling into each other's arms. Were we then spouses, ignorant of shame, who penetrate and mingle in each other. Again we became betrothed.

That shame, that ban must now be overcome. Not merely for each other, in spite of the flesh and space. Nor must we stop our union where it stands. We must wed, O my beloved, penetrate into each other and mingle.

"It is not possible," a reasonable voice says suddenly in my spirit. But I know well that it is possible. I know that everything is possible. For weeks I have been learning, and since yesterday, surely, I know that the impossible is what convention decrees shall not be attempted: what ought not to tempt us. The impossible, O my soul, is your promise not to *will*. That is the covenant with you.

Heavens! How fragile the universe is. Now I am almost afraid.

Yes, O soul, I am afraid of you. I am afraid of the soul. Fear it may do something I have not asked of it. Fear, now, of the fragility of that covenant of yours.

Pierre, my dear sweet Pierre, husband, living comrade, my dear companion in this life and in this world, I swear to you I ask nothing more. I swear to you I will be good. Yes, the rest is impossible. I have sworn.

XIII

A GREAT many years have passed since these events took place. In the interval, others have occurred, immense and public—the significance of which is easier to recognize—in which millions of actors and witnesses took part, and which, by force or desire, have in the lives of each of us occupied an exaggeratedly obvious place.

Despite everything, I have never felt myself menaced by the risk of forgetting the circumstances, so little remarkable externally, in which I had to revise my opinion of the universe.

I have had proof on a number of occasions that Lucienne, who lived them at closer quarters and more profoundly than myself, has no more forgotten them than I. But what I found difficult to realize before becoming acquainted with her notes, was the degree to which, for her too at that epoch, her attitude to the universe had to be revised.

The modesty which has persisted between us on this subject only becomes more singular. Yet, nevertheless, less strange than the whole of our attitude towards each other.

To look at us, since those days, who would take us for anything but the most ordinary couple? Who would imagine that such an adventure had passed through our lives? Even intimate acquaintance with us would reveal nothing, or almost. By degrees we came back to the daily round, as if we had never left it. Without striking divergences, we observed the ordinary fashion of life, with its servitudes, its limitations, its apparent simplicity, as if they were dictated by mere necessity and reason. The submission we tendered to the common order of things could not have been greater, even had we not been oblivious of its fragility or ever placed a finger on one of its breaking points. Certain very affecting conjunctions of circumstances, particularly tragic forms and durations of absence and separation experienced by us, as by so many others, during these

years, have not been able to decide Lucienne to infringe the sort of vow implied in those last lines of hers, which I have quoted. And if I have chanced to regret, to feel still more forcefully the absurdity of the situations in which I found myself caught, I cannot say that I continued really to count on aid in that direction.

Is that weakness on our part? Timidity of the spirit, frightened by some marvellous capture, greater than itself, and soon embarrassed by it? Or that docility to the common attitude, which results in so many people only daring to be sure of the light of day when everyone else is in agreement about it? Without going so far as oblivion, have we not allowed what we lived and saw to fade by degrees, lose the colours of reality, become vague and inert simply through age, like a corked wine?

Something of all this there is, it may be; but I do not think that it is the essential. Even before beginning this work, I knew. I knew it less well, with obscurities and confusion in the detail, with different degrees of certitude as to the whole, but I knew.

I have not ceased to know. But neither have I ceased pretending. For years now, Lucienne and I, each for himself, have been pretending. Not that we have forgotten, that would be too clumsy a pretence: but that we have not perceived in what way what happened to us once, to see and live through, could go on reverberating and for ever influence our manner of seeing and living.

We make believe, we are accomplices. Not so much accomplices of each other as of something we do not want to trouble.

Just now, full of these thoughts, I was walking in the street. I looked at the people. I no longer meet the faces of Marseilles. (I am not a sailor now. I am in charge of a department at head offices.) They are Parisian faces, somewhat tighter.

I was thinking "Many, of course, suspect nothing. They live. They travel, associate, sit down, make their resistances, their thrusts, their plans and forecasts in a world they have been taught to know, in sincerest conformity with that guaranteed

world, in the purest good faith. But among them, there must be some who suspect ; who have some reason or other for suspicion, who in some way or other have been ' witnesses ' ; who know that it is possible to be a ' witness.' Nothing of this transpires. Neither their faces nor the way they carry themselves mark them out. Nor what they say (they avoid talking about it to others), nor even that they think (they avoid thinking about it). They are like us. ' They make believe.'

I took a taxi. And I added to myself " So long as you don't look for the breaks, everything works." I listened to the purring engine, to the recurrent throb. " If I cared to waste some hours on it, I might manage to work everything out. I should know in advance the exact moment this panel would begin vibrating. A little more chemistry, and it would be equally clear at what moment the chauffeur would let go the driving wheel to sneeze." I saw the double band of sodium in, I have forgotten which, β of Centaurus, when I was studying Astrophysics. " It is still there. Someone on Mount Wilson is perhaps even now measuring its displacement. The complicity enters into everything."

But what is it that they want to spare? To save? Who can say?

We had come to a crossing that was being partially repaired. One street was up. Protected by the cords, standing in sand, some fifty people surrounded a hawker. Suppose that instead of a safety razor, he had a miracle to show them ; that he was one of those who had found a breaking point ; that, for example, he was saying to them " I am going to resuscitate someone dead, a relative, someone in the district, anyone you like," and that, in fact, he did resuscitate him. The dead man appears. The man asks him to sit for a moment on that decrepit chair I see there, to get his breath a little, and then to stand up and say something, to recall a few reminiscences to those who knew him. . . . I can imagine the faces there would be in that gathering ; the eyes expressing a mixture of amusement, anxiety, distress, the grimace on many faces, the fear of having been taken in, yes, but even more, the distress of being witnesses, the desire to slip away. And many in fact do go off, like people who have no time to spare. Casually and smiling

a little, all they say is "Strange." Perhaps a few yards farther on, they stop in front of a boot display or some political poster.

Yet, what promise have they made, those people? What is it they want to defend? Their tranquillity, Bompard would say; and he would add also, some sort of "universal tranquillity."

I think of Bompard, of his myth of the wall. Where did his ideas on that subject come from, that wisdom even, which in certain aspects was far in advance of mine? Had he too been a "witness" and was it so long ago that he has now fallen back into so much disillusioned moderation? Yet I find it difficult to believe he could ever have been involved in some personal experience. His voice sounded altogether too unmoved. You cannot afterwards detach yourself to such a point. Witness by proxy, possibly. Once or twice, by hazard, he "saw" something. Since he is perspicacious, he realized it was stupid to go on talking of charlatanism and illusion always. And his respect for science is not such as to prevent him thinking what he wants to—but he loathes risks. He will not bear "false witness." But he allows others to do so for reasons of state. He is a sceptical conservative. He likes jeering at the minions of order. But when necessary, he reserves the right to shake them by the hand.

But why was it necessary for us, Lucienne and myself, to behave more or less like Bompard and the rest? For we—we have not been chance witnesses, and still less, unworthy witnesses, those of whom it has been said they have eyes and see not, ears and hear not. For myself, I believe I welcomed the event without cowardice or bad faith. As for Lucienne, she outdistanced it with so much will to dare, such determined exaltation, that it resembled heroism itself.

I am unable to imagine that it was our drab tranquillity we were defending, nor the general drab tranquillity. Neither then, nor since, have I been conscious of working to consolidate "the wall," in company with Bompard's surly peasants. As for Lucienne, who ever did more than she to get out? Who

more patiently sought out a breach, to widen it with all her powers, and cast herself beyond into unknown territory, the farthest possible?

Yet, no! Not the farthest possible. At a certain moment, she was afraid of her power. What she feared was just that thing that was possible.

Love tells itself it stifles within the limitations of existence. Love batters down, crying out against the narrow limits of the world. Suddenly, it makes a despairing leap. But when at last everything lies broken about it and the way is free, it is afraid.

The soul rushes towards union. It moans with rapture when the bodies join, and the flesh travails to conjoin. But it demands more. The bodies stop it. It wants to pass beyond. When the bodies no longer stop it, it trembles of itself and stops.

What is that thing then which it finds possible and yet is frightened by?

I raise my hand. The bounds come terribly near; through the wall at the end of the room, through the wood of the table, through the arm of the chair, everything I touch is frontier.

And I too, turning towards what is in myself, say to it:
"It is your covenant that makes those bounds!"

THE END

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